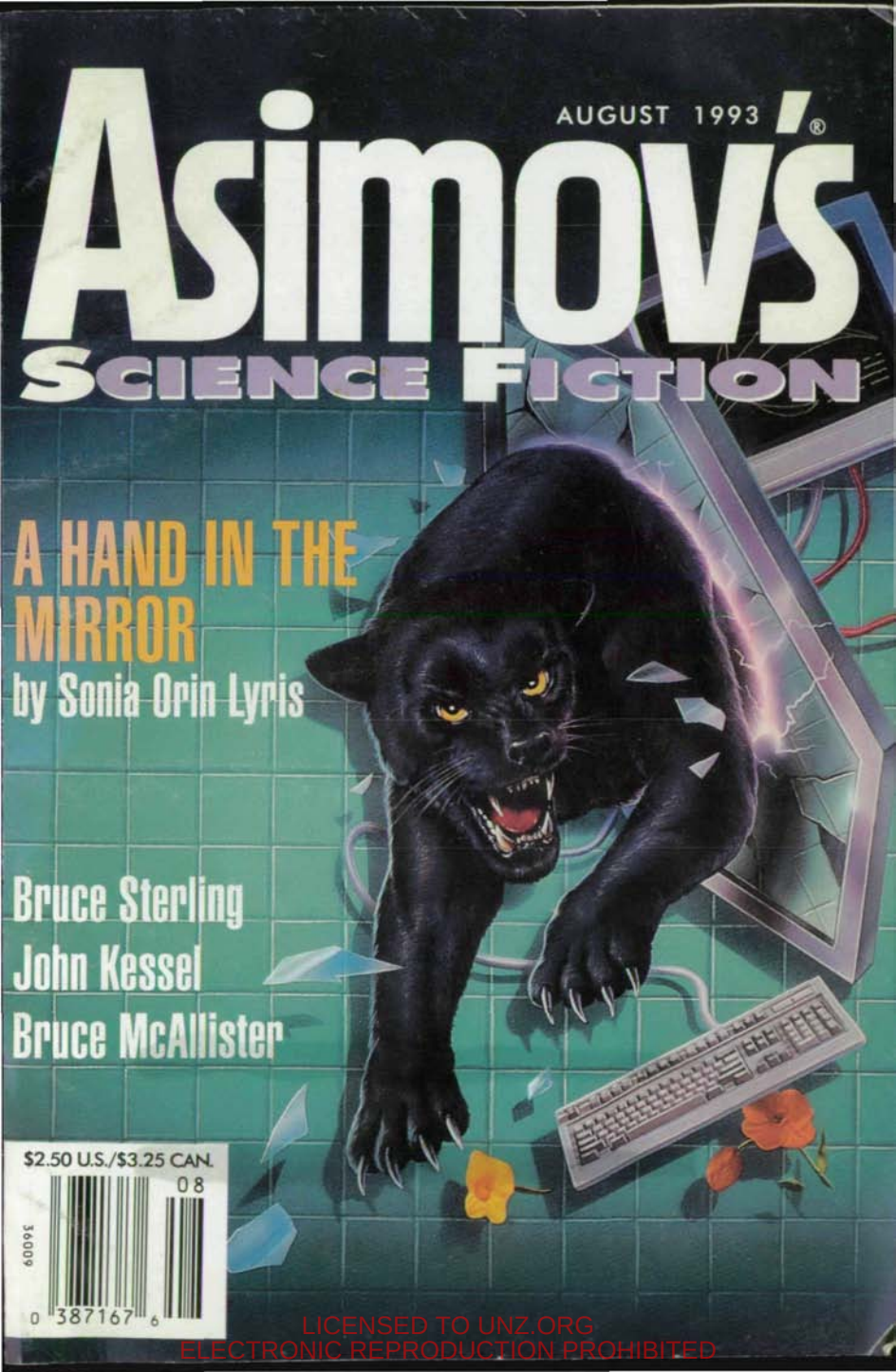

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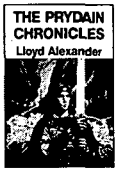

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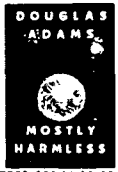

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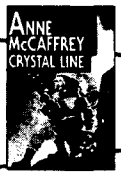

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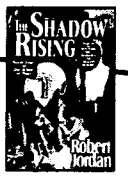

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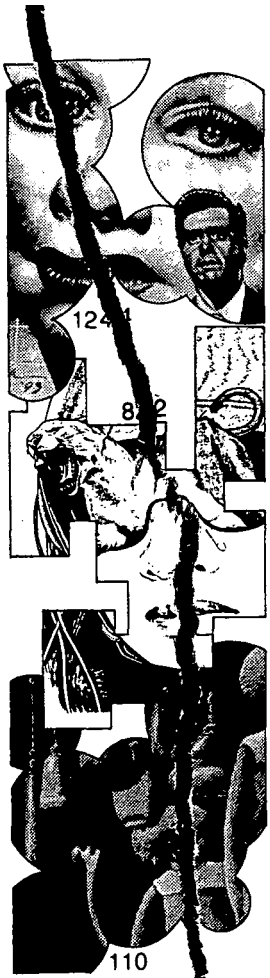

Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)
Gardner Dozois: Editor **Sheila Williams:** Managing Editor
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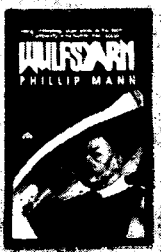

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LETTERS

Dear Sir;

What a shame that the book review of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through The Looking Glass* by Baird Searles in the mid-December 1992 edition of *Asimov's Science Fiction* was published too late for comment by the *good doctor*. I know he would have treasured it; and, that would seem to be about the ultimate praise for both Isaac Asimov and Baird Searles.

Yours Sincerely,

Ed J. Brogden
Sarnia, ONT
Canada

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Did you know that people who are blind can enjoy your magazine? More than 500 copies of each issue are printed in braille at Clovernook's Braille Printing House.

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Gerald W. Mundy, Ed.D.,
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Dear Mr. Dozois:

I am writing to correct some misinformation in Michael Armstrong's story, "Everything that Rises, Must Converge," in the February 1993 *Asimov's*.

Kate Wilhelm's "The Man Without a Planet" was in the July 1962 *F&SF*, as stated in Armstrong's story. However, that issue is *not* "the one with the Emshwiller cover of the tattooed robot"; the July 1962 cover was a moonscape by Mel Hunter. The *June* 1962 *F&SF* (no story by Kate Wilhelm) *did* have the Emshwiller cover, but the "tattooed" figure is a man in a spacesuit, not a robot. (Well, I suppose the guy in the spacesuit *could*

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be an android, but that seems gratuitous; anyway, the "tattoos" are on the suit.)
Sincerely,

Fred Galvin
Lawrence, KS

Dear Mr. Dozois and Ms. Williams,

I love SF and fantasy fiction and have for forty years. I started reading it when I was nine. The son of friends of my parents who was at Case Institute of Technology studying engineering opened his vast SF library to me. I borrowed twenty books at a time, reading them with joy and wonder.

I wanted to somehow write a "thank-you note" to all of the authors, editors, publishers, and staff who have written and produced fiction that has been such a powerful force for goodness and love in my life.

I wonder how many other people may have been affected by SF/fantasy like this?

I can't tell you how many times I have actually sent the mental messages "thank you so very, very much" to authors, magazines, book reviewers, etc.

SF still provides a vast canvas of peer support, adventure, entertainment, and, at best, wonder and joy to me.

Your February 1993 issue inspired this letter. There were so many "good wins out" stories in it that I flashed back to my childhood, and the great, wonderful lessons of better humanity that I learned from Asimov, Clarke, Bradbury, Heinlein, Sturgeon, Zenna Henderson, and so many more—the list is *so* long—up to this very day.

In this issue it was Mary Rosen-

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by Connie Willis

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"City of Truth"
by James Morrow

Best Novelette
"Danny Goes to Mars"
by Pamela Sargent
(Asimov's, October '92)

Best Short Story
"Even the Queen"
by Connie Willis
(Asimov's, April '92)

Grand Master
Frederik Pohl

blum's "Entrada," Maggie Flinn's "One Morning in the Looney Bin," and Michael Armstrong's "Everything that Rises, Must Converge." So—thanks again.
Sincerely,

Sharon Shively
Novelty, OH

Dear Editor,

Living overseas with parents working at the American Embassy here in Moscow gave me a great perspective on Janet Kagan's "The Nutcracker Coup." Living in a foreign culture on Earth is an experience I'm used to, and I can well imagine living in an extraterrestrial culture. Even before reading Janet Kagan's story, I often wondered about what embassies would be like if we ever found extraterrestrial life. The character of Clarence Doggett I was displeased with, since Doggett is my last name as well, and he was a dislikable character, but he did bear a resemblance to politically appointed ambassadors (excluding Benjamin Franklin and Shirley Temple Black).

I am looking forward to reading a story by Jim Young, due to be published this spring in your magazine, since I met Jim Young when he was my parents' classmate at the Foreign Service Institute.

Thomas Doggett
Moscow, Russia

Jim Young's novelette, "Microde City," was our June 1993 cover. We hope it's made its way to Moscow by now.

—Sheila Williams

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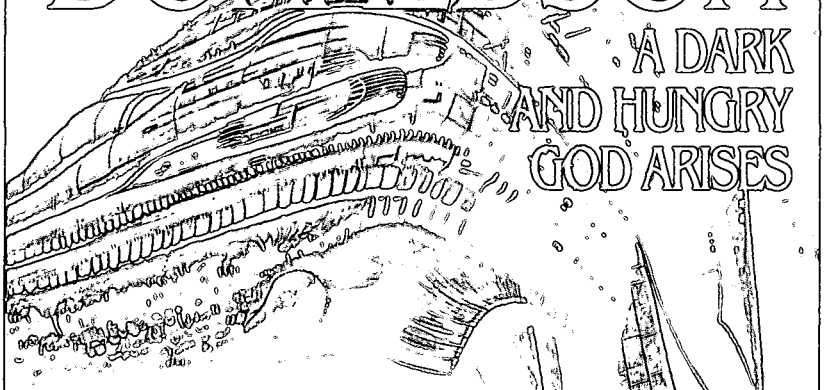

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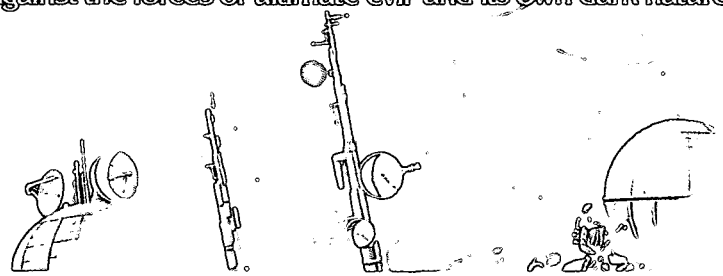

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"The Franchise" and "Southpaw"—a story you'll find later in this issue—meet at an obscure, yet pivotal crossroad. Had the major player taken the other path, American history might have moved in an entirely different direction. Serendipitously, both stories appeared in our offices at the same time. They treat their subject in widely dissimilar ways, but together they offer our August issue two novel pictures of the boys of summer.

John Kessel tells us his "interest in baseball goes back as far as my interest in SF and fantasy; my interest in politics comes a bit later. Up through 1948, 'The Francise,' is an accurate depiction of the lives of my two main characters." Mr. Kessel has recently become a regular book review columnist for *F&SF*, and the New York *Times* named his story collection, *Meeting in Infinity*, one of the notable books of 1992.

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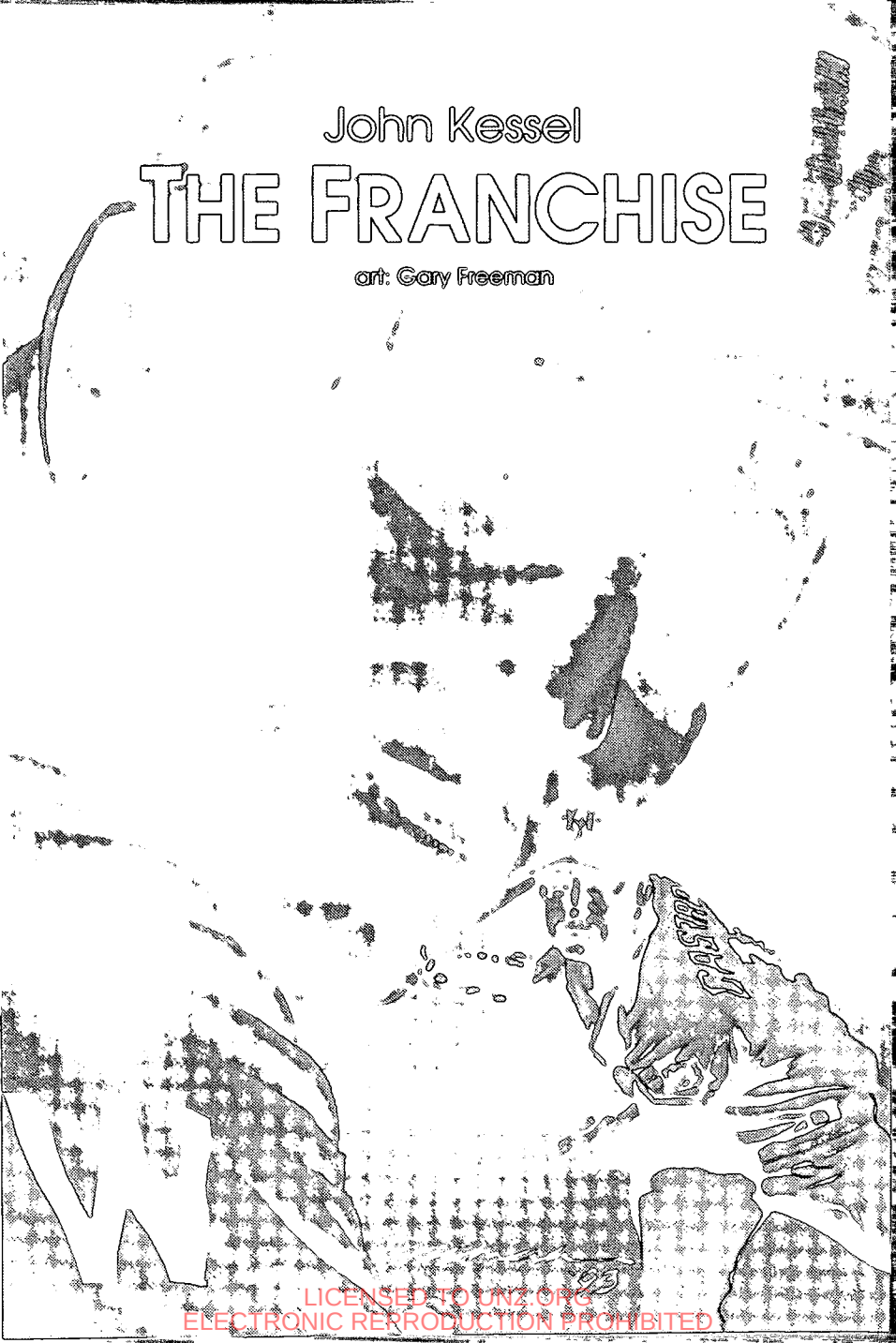
John Kessel

THE FRANCHISE

art: Gary Freeman



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"Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball."

—Jacques Barzun

ONE

When George Herbert Walker Bush strode into the batter's box to face the pitcher they called the Franchise, it was the bottom of the second, and the Senators were already a run behind.

But Killebrew had managed a bloop double down the right field line and two outs later still stood on second in the bright October sunlight, waiting to be driven in. The bleachers were crammed full of restless fans in colorful shirts. Far behind Killebrew, Griffith Stadium's green center field wall zig-zagged to avoid the towering oak in Mrs. Mahan's back yard, lending the stadium its crazy dimensions. They said the only players ever to homer into that tree were Mantle and Ruth. George imagined how the stadium would erupt if he did it, drove the first pitch right out of the old ball yard, putting the Senators ahead in the first game of the 1959 World Series. If wishes were horses, his father had told him more than once, then beggars would ride.

George stepped into the box, ground in his back foot, squinted at the pitcher. The first pitch, a fastball, so surprised him that he didn't get his bat off his shoulder. Belt-high, it split the middle of the plate, but the umpire called, "Ball!"

"Ball?" Schmidt, the Giants' catcher, grumbled.

"You got a problem?" the umpire said.

"Me? I got no problem." Schmidt tossed the ball back to the pitcher, who shook his head in histrionic Latin American dismay, as if bemoaning the sins of the world that he'd seen only too much of since he'd left Havana eleven years before. "But the Franchise, he no like."

George ignored them and set himself for the next pitch. The big Cuban went into his herky-jerky windup, deceptively slow, then kicked and threw. George was barely into his swing when the ball thwacked into the catcher's glove. "Steerike one!" the umpire called.

He was going to have to get around faster. The next pitch was another fastball, outside and high, but George had already triggered before the release and missed it by a foot, twisting himself around so that he almost fell over.

Schmidt took the ball out of his glove, showed it to George, and threw it back to the mound.

The next was a curve, outside by an inch. Ball two.

The next a fastball that somehow George managed to foul into the dirt.

The next a fastball up under his chin that had him diving into the dirt himself. Ball three. Full count.

An expectant murmur rose in the crowd, then fell to a profound silence,

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the silence of a church, of heaven, of a lover's secret heart. Was his father among them, breathless, hoping? Thousands awaited the next pitch. Millions more watched on television. Killebrew took a three-step lead off second. The Giants made no attempt to hold him on. The chatter from the Senators' dugout lit up. "Come on, George Herbert Walker Bush, bear down! Come on, Professor, grit up!"

George set himself, weight on his back foot. He cocked his bat, squinted out at the pitcher. The vainglorious Latino gave him a piratical grin, shook off Schmidt's sign. George felt his shoulders tense. Calm, boy, calm, he told himself. You've been shot at, you've faced Prescott Bush across a dining room table—this is nothing but baseball. But instead of calm he felt panic, and as the Franchise went into his windup, his mind stood blank as a stone.

The ball started out right for his head. George jerked back in a desperate effort to get out of the way as the pitch, a curve of prodigious sweep, dropped through the heart of the plate. "Steerike!" the umpire called.

Instantly the scene changed from hushed expectation to sudden movement. The crowd groaned. The players relaxed and began jogging off the field. Killebrew kicked the dirt and walked back to the dugout to get his glove. The organist started up. Behind the big Chesterfield sign in right, the scorekeeper slid another goose egg onto the board for the Senators. Though the whole thing was similar to moments he had experienced more times than he would care to admit during his ten years in the minors, the simple volume of thirty thousand voices sighing in disappointment because he, George Herbert Walker Bush, had failed, left him standing stunned at the plate with the bat limp in his clammy hands. They didn't get thirty thousand fans in Chattanooga.

Schmidt flipped the ball toward the mound. As the Franchise jogged past him, he flashed George that superior smile. "A magnificent swing," he said.

George stumbled back to the dugout. Lemon, heading out to left, shook his head. "Nice try, Professor," the shortstop Consolo said.

"Pull your jock up and get out to first," said Lavagetto, the manager. He spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the sod next to the end of the dugout. "Señor Fidel Castro welcomes you to the bigs."

TWO

The Senators lost 7-1. Castro pitched nine innings, allowed four hits, struck out ten. George fanned three times. In the sixth, he let a low throw get by him; the runner ended up on third and the Giants followed with four unearned runs.

In the locker room his teammates avoided him. Nobody had played well, but George knew they had him pegged as a choker. Lavagetto came through with a few words of encouragement. "We'll get 'em tomorrow," he said. George expected the manager to yank him for somebody who at

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least wouldn't cost them runs on defense. When he left without saying anything, George was grateful to him for at least letting him go another night before benching him.

Barbara and the boys had been in the stands, but had gone home. They would be waiting for him. He didn't want to go. The place was empty by the time he walked out through the tunnels to the street. His head was filled with images from the game. Castro had toyed with him; he no doubt enjoyed humiliating the son of a U.S. senator. The Cuban's look of heavy-lidded disdain sparked an unaccustomed rage in George. It wasn't good sportsmanship. You played hard, and you won or lost, but you didn't rub the other guy's nose in it. That was bush league, and George, despite his unfortunate name, was anything but bush.

That George Bush should end up playing first base for the Washington Senators in the 1959 World Series was the result of as improbable a sequence of events as had ever conspired to make a man of a rich boy. The key moment had come on a May Saturday in 1948 when he had shaken the hand of Babe Ruth.

That May morning the Yale baseball team was to play Brown, but before the game a ceremony was held to honor Ruth, donating the manuscript of his autobiography to the university library. George, captain of the Yale squad, would accept the manuscript. As he stood before the microphone set up between the pitcher's mound and second base, he was stunned by the gulf between the pale hulk standing before him and the legend he represented. Ruth, only fifty-three on that spring morning, could hardly speak for the throat cancer that was killing him. He gasped out a few words, stooped over, rail thin, no longer the giant he had been in the twenties. George took his hand. It was dry and papery and brown as a leaf in fall. Through his grip George felt the contact with glorious history, with feats of heroism that would never be matched, with 714 home runs and 1356 extra base hits, with a lifetime slugging percentage of .690, with the called shot and the 60-homer season and the 1927 Yankees and the curse of the Red Sox. An electricity surged up his arm and directly into his soul. Ruth had accomplished as much, in his way, as a man could accomplish in a life, more, even, George realized to his astonishment, than had his father Prescott Bush. He stood there stunned, charged with an unexpected, unasked for purpose.

He had seen death in the war, had tasted it in the blood that streamed from his forehead when he'd struck it against the tail of the TBM Avenger as he parachuted out of the flaming bomber over the Pacific in 1943. He had felt death's hot breath on his back as he frantically paddled the yellow rubber raft away from Chichi Jima against waves pushing him back into the arms of the Japanese, had felt death draw away and offered up a silent prayer when the conning tower of the U.S.S. *Finback* broke through the agitated seas to save him from a savage fate—to, he always knew, some higher purpose. He had imagined that purpose to be business or public service. Now he recognized that he had been seeing it

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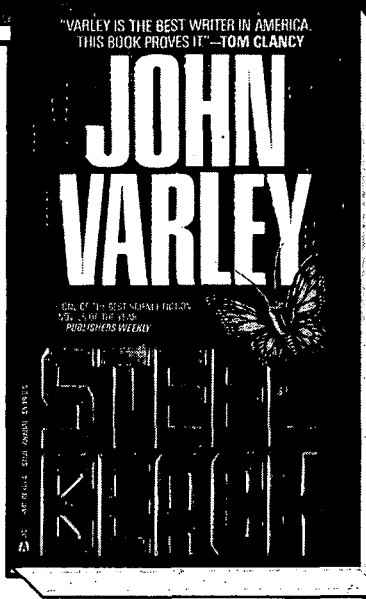
The tube capsule back to King City was a quarter full. I used the time to try to salvage something from the wasted afternoon. Looking around me, I saw that all my colleagues were busy at the same task. Eyes were rolled up, mouths hung open, here and there a finger twitched. It had to be either a day trip from the Catatonic Academy, or the modern press at work....

Okay, so I lied about the open mouths. Not all D.I. users look like retarded zombies when they interface. But they look asleep, and I've never been comfortable sleeping in public places.

— Excerpted from *Steel Beach*



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through his father's eyes, that in fact his fate lay elsewhere. It lay between the chalk lines of a playing field, on the greensward of the infield, within the smells of pine tar and sawdust and chewing tobacco and liniment. He could feel it through the tendons of the fleshless hand of Babe Ruth that he held in his own at that very instant.

The day after he graduated from Yale he signed, for no bonus, with the Cleveland Indians. Ten years later, George had little to show for his bold choice. He wasn't the best first baseman you ever saw. Nobody ever stopped him on the street to ask for his autograph. He never made the Indians, got traded to the Browns. He hung on, bouncing up and down the farm systems of seventh and eighth-place teams. Every spring he went to Florida with high expectations, every April he started the season in Richmond, in Rochester, in Chattanooga. Just two months earlier he had considered packing it in and looking for another career. Then a series of miracles happened.

Chattanooga was the farm team for the Senators, who hadn't won a pennant since 1933. For fifteen years, under their notoriously cheap owner Clark Griffith, they'd been as bad as you could get. But in 1959, their young third baseman, Harmon Killebrew, hit forty-two home runs. Sluggers Jim Lemon and Roy Sievers had career years. A big Kansas boy named Bob Allison won rookie of the year in center field. Camilo Pascual won twenty-two games, struck out 215 men. A kid named Jim Kaat won seventeen. Everything broke right, including Mickey Mantle's leg. After hovering a couple of games over .500 through the All Star break, the Senators got hot in August, won ninety games and finished one ahead of the Yankees.

When late in August right fielder Albie Pearson got hurt, Lavagetto switched Sievers to right, and there was George Bush, thirty-five years old, starting at first base for the American League champions in the 1959 World Series against the New York Giants.

The Giants were heavy favorites. Who would bet against a team that fielded Willie Mays, Orlando Cepeda, Willie McCovey, Felipe Alou, and pitchers like Johnny Antonelli, the fireballer Toothpick Sam Jones, and the Franchise, Fidel Castro. If, prior to the series, you'd told George Herbert Walker Bush the Senators were doomed, he would not have disagreed with you. After game one he had no reason to think otherwise.

He stood outside the stadium looking for a cab, contemplating his series record—one game, 0 for 4, one error—when a pale old man in a loud sportscoat spoke to him. "Just be glad you're here," the man said.

The man had watery blue eyes, a sharp face. He was thin enough to look ill. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're the fellow the Nats called up in September, right? Remember, even if you never play another inning, at least you were there. You felt the sun on your back, got dirt on your hands, saw the stands full of people from down on the field. Not many get even that much."

"The Franchise made me look pretty sick."

"You have to face him down."

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"Easier said than done."

"Don't say—do."

"Who are you, old man?"

The man hesitated. "Name's Weaver. I'm a—a fan. Yes, I'm a baseball fan." He touched the brim of his hat and walked away.

George thought about it on the cab ride home. It did not make him feel much better. When he got back to the cheap furnished apartment they were renting, Barbara tried to console him.

"My father wasn't there, was he?" George said.

"No. But he called after the game. He wants to see you."

"Probably wants to give me a few tips on how to comport myself. Or maybe just gloat."

Bar came around behind his chair, rubbed his tired shoulders. George got up and switched on the television. While he waited for it to warm up, the silence stretched. He faced Barbara. She had put on a few pounds over the years, but he remembered the first time he'd seen her across the dance floor in the red dress. He was seventeen. "What do you think he wants?"

"I don't know, George."

"I haven't seen him around in the last ten years. Have you?"

The TV had warmed up and Prescott Bush's voice blared out from behind George. "I hope the baseball Senators win," he was saying. "They've had a better year than the Democratic ones."

George twisted down the volume, stared for a moment at his father's handsome face, then snapped it off. "Give me a drink," he told Barbara. He noticed the boys standing in the doorway, afraid. Barbara hesitated, poured a scotch and water.

"And don't stint on the scotch!" George yelled. He turned to Neil. "What are you looking at, you little weasel! Go to bed."

Barbara slammed down the glass so hard the scotch splashed the counter. "What's got into you, George? You're acting like a crazy man."

George took the half-empty glass from her hand. "My father's got into me, that's what. He got into me thirty years ago and I can't get him out."

Barbara shot him a look in which disgust outweighed pity and went back to the boys' room. George slumped in the armchair and stared at the sports page of the *Post* lying on the ottoman. *Castro to Start Series,* the headline read.

Castro. What did he know about struggle? Yet the egomaniac lout was considered a hero, while he, George Herbert Walker Bush, who at twenty-four had been at the head of every list of the young men most likely to succeed, had accomplished precisely nothing.

People who didn't know any better had assumed that because of his background, money, and education he would grow to be one of the ones who told others what it was necessary for them to do, but George was coming to realize, with a surge of panic, that he was not special. His moment of communion with Babe Ruth had been a delusion, because Ruth was another type of man. Perhaps Ruth was used by the teams that

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bought and sold him, but inside Ruth was some compulsion that drove him to be larger than the uses to which he was put, so that in the end he deformed those uses, remade the game itself.

George, talented though he had seemed, had no such *size*. The vital force that had animated his grandfather George Herbert Walker, after whom he was named, the longing after mystery that had impelled the metaphysical poet George Herbert, after whom that grandfather had been named, had diminished into a pitiful trickle in George Herbert Walker Bush. No volcanic forces surged inside him. When he listened late in the night, all he could hear of his soul was a thin keening, a buzz like a bug trapped in a jar. *Let me go, let me go,* it whined. Love me. Admire me. I pray to God and dad and the president and Mr. Griffith to make me a success.

That old man at the ball park was wrong. It was not enough, not nearly enough, just to be there. He wanted to *be* somebody. What good was it just to stand on first base in the World Series if you came away from it a laughingstock? To have your father call you not because you were a hero, but only to remind you once again what a failure you are.

"I'll be damned if I go see him," George muttered to the empty room.

THREE

President Nixon called Lavagetto in the middle of the night with a suggestion for the batting order in the second game. "Put Bush in the number five slot," Nixon said.

Lavagetto wondered how he was supposed to tell the President of the United States that he was out of his mind. "Yessir, Mr. President."

"See, that way you get another right handed batter at the top of the order."

Lavagetto considered pointing out to the president that the Giants were pitching a right hander in game two. "Yessir, Mr. President," Lavagetto said. His wife was awake now, looking at him with irritation from her side of the bed. He put his hand over the mouthpiece and said, "Go to sleep."

"Who is it at this hour?"

"The President of the United States."

"Uh-huh."

Nixon had some observations about one-run strategies. Lavagetto agreed with him until he could get him off the line. He looked at his alarm clock. It was half past two.

Nixon had sounded full of manic energy. His voice dripped dogmatic assurance. He wondered if Nixon was a drinking man. Walter Winchell said that Eisenhower's death had shoved the veep into an office he was unprepared to hold.

Lavagetto shut off the light and lay back down, but he couldn't sleep. What about Bush? Damn Pearson for getting himself hurt. Bush should

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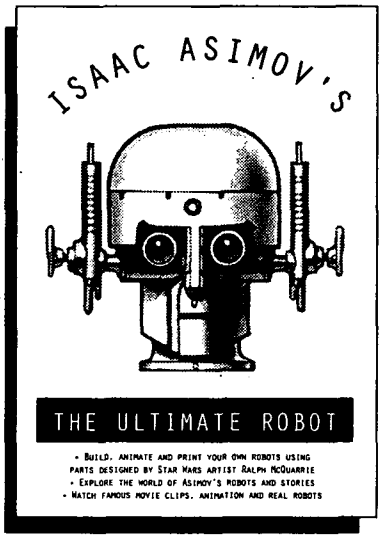
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be down in the minors where he belonged. He looked to be cracking under the pressure like a ripe melon.

But maybe the guy could come through, prove himself. He was no kid. Lavagetto knew from personal experience the pressures of the Series, how the unexpected could turn on the swing of the bat. He recalled that fourth game of the '47 series, his double to right field that cost Floyd Bevens his no-hitter, and the game. Lavagetto had been a thirty-four-year-old utility infielder for the luckless Dodgers, an aging substitute playing out the string at the end of his career. In that whole season he'd hit only one other double. When he'd seen that ball twist past the right fielder, the joy had shot through his chest like lightning. The Dodger fans had gone crazy; his teammates had leapt all over him laughing and shouting and swearing like Durocher himself.

He remembered that, despite the miracle, the Dodgers had lost the Series to the Yankees in seven.

Lavagetto turned over. First in War, First in Peace, Last in the American League . . . that was the Washington Senators. He hoped young Kaat was getting more sleep than he was.

FOUR

Tuesday afternoon, in front of a wild capacity crowd, young Jim Kaat pitched one of the best games by a rookie in the history of the series. The twenty-year-old lefthander battled Toothpick Sam Jones pitch for pitch, inning for inning. Jones struggled with his control, walking six in the first seven innings, throwing two wild pitches. If it weren't for the over-eagerness of the Senators, swinging at balls a foot out of the strike zone, they would surely have scored; instead they squandered opportunity after opportunity. The fans grew restless. They could see it happening, in sour expectation of disaster built up over twenty-five frustrated years: Kaat would pitch brilliantly and it would be wasted because the Giants would score on some bloop single.

Through seven the game stayed a scoreless tie. By some fluke George could not fathom, Lavagetto, instead of benching him, had moved him up in the batting order. Though he was still without a hit, he had been playing superior defense. In the seventh he snuffed a Giant uprising when he dove to snag a screamer off the bat of Schmidt for the third out, leaving runners at second and third.

Then, with two down in the top of the eighth, Cepeda singled. George moved in to hold him on. Kaat threw over a couple of times to keep the runner honest, with Cepeda trying to judge Kaat's move. Mays took a strike, then a ball. Cepeda edged a couple of strides away from first.

Kaat went into his stretch, paused, and whipped the ball to first, catching Cepeda leaning the wrong way. Picked off! But Cepeda, instead of diving back, took off for second. George whirled and threw hurriedly.

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The ball sailed over Consolo's head into left field and Cepeda went to third. E-3.

Kaat was shaken. Mays hit a screamer between first and second. George dove, but it was by him, and Cepeda jogged home with the lead.

Kaat struck out McCovey, but the damage was done. "You bush leagues clown!" a fan yelled. George's face burned. As he trotted off the field, from the Giants' dugout came Castro's shout: "A heroic play, Mr. Rabbit!"

George wanted to keep going through the dugout and into the clubhouse. On the bench his teammates were conspicuously silent. Consolo sat down next to him. "Shake it off," he said. "You're up this inning."

George grabbed his bat and moved to the end of the dugout. First up in the bottom of the eighth was Sievers. He got behind 0-2, battled back as Jones wasted a couple, then fouled off four straight strikes until he'd worked Jones for a walk. The organist played charge lines and the crowd started chanting. Lemon sacrificed Sievers to second. Killebrew hit a drive that brought the people to their feet screaming before it curved just outside the left field foul pole, then popped out to short. He threw down his bat and stalked back toward the dugout.

"C'mon, professor," Killebrew said as he passed Bush in the on-deck circle. "Give yourself a reason for being here."

Jones was a scary right hander with one pitch: the heater. In his first three at bats George had been overpowered; by the last he'd managed a walk. This time he went up with a plan: he was going to take the first pitch, get ahead in the count, then drive the ball.

The first pitch was a fastball just high. Ball one.

Make contact. Don't force it. Go with the pitch.

The next was another fastball; George swung as soon as Jones let it go and sent a screaming line drive over the third baseman's head. The crowd roared and he was halfway down the first base line when the third base umpire threw up his hands and yelled, "Foul ball!"

He caught his breath, picked up his bat and returned to the box. Sievers jogged back to second. Schmidt, standing with his hands on his hips, didn't look at George. From the Giants' dugout George heard, "Kiss your luck goodbye, you effeminate rabbit! You rich man's table leavings! You are devoid of even the makings of guts!"

George stepped out of the box. Castro had come down the dugout to the near end and was leaning out, arms braced on the field, hurling his abuse purple faced. Rigney and the pitching coach had him by the shoulders, tugging him back. George turned away, feeling a cold fury in his belly.

He would show them all. He forgot to calculate, swept by rage. He set himself as far back in the box as possible. Jones took off his cap, wiped his forearm across his brow and leaned over to check the signs. He shook off the first, then nodded and went into his windup.

As soon as he released George swung, and was caught completely off

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balance by a change-up. "Strike two, you shadow of a man!" Castro shouted. "Unnatural offspring of a snail and a worm! Strike two!"

Jones tempted him with an outside pitch; George didn't bite. The next was another high fastball; George started, then checked his swing. "Ball!" the home plate ump called. Fidel booed. Schmidt argued, the ump shook his head. Full count.

George knew he should look for a particular pitch, in a particular part of the plate. After ten years of professional ball, this ought to be second nature, but Jones was so wild he didn't have a clue. George stepped out of the box, rubbed his hands on his pants. "Yes, wipe your sweaty hands, mama's boy! You have all the machismo of a bank book!"

The rage came to his defense. He picked a decision out of the air, arbitrary as the breeze: fastball, outside.

Jones went into his windup. He threw his body forward, whipped his arm high over his shoulder. Fastball, outside. George swiveled his hips through the box, kept his head down, extended his arms. The contact of the bat with the ball was so slight he wasn't sure he'd hit it at all. A line drive down the right field line, hooking as it rose, hooking, hooking . . . curling just inside the foul pole into the stands 320 feet away.

The fans exploded. George, feeling rubbery, jogged around first, toward second. Sievers pumped his fist as he rounded third; the Senators were up on their feet in the dugout shouting and slapping each other. Jones had his hands on his hips, head down and back to the plate. George rounded third and jogged across home, where he was met by Sievers, who slugged him in the shoulder, and the rest of his teammates in the dugout, who laughed and slapped his butt.

The crowd began to chant "SEN-a-TOR, SEN-a-TOR." After a moment George realized they were chanting for him. He climbed out of the dugout again and tipped his hat, scanning the stands for Barbara and the boys. As he did he saw his father in the presidential box, leaning over to speak into the ear of the cheering President Nixon. He felt a rush of hope, ducked his head and got back into the dugout.

Kaat held the Giants in the ninth and the Senators won, 2-1.

In the locker room after the game, George's teammates whooped and slapped him on the back. Chuck Stobbs, the clubhouse comic, called him "the Bambino." For a while George hoped that his father might come down to congratulate him. Instead, for the first time in his career, reporters swarmed around him. They fired flashbulbs in salvoes. They pushed back their hats, flipped open their notebooks and asked him questions.

"What's it feel like to win a big game like this?"

"I'm just glad to be here. I'm not one of these winning-is-everything guys."

"They're calling you the senator. Your father is a senator. How do you feel about that?"

"I guess we're both senators," George said. "He just got to Washington a little sooner than I did."

They liked that a lot. George felt the smile on his face like a frozen

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mask. For the first time in his life he was aware of the muscles it took to smile, as tense as if they were lifting a weight.

After the reporters left he showered. George wondered what his father had been whispering into the president's ear, while everyone around him cheered. Some sarcastic comment? Some irrelevant political advice?

When he got back to his locker, toweling himself dry, he found a note lying on the bench. He opened it eagerly. It read:

To the Effeminate Rabbit;
Even the rodent has his day. But not when the eagle pitches.
Sincerely,
Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz

FIVE

That Fidel Castro would go so far out of his way to insult George Herbert Walker Bush would come as no surprise to anyone who knew him. Early in Castro's first season in the majors, a veteran Phillies reliever, after watching Fidel warm up, approached the young Cuban. "Where did you get that curve?" he asked incredulously.

"From you," said Fidel. "That's why you don't have one."

But sparking his reaction to Bush was more than simple egotism. Fidel's antipathy grew from circumstances of background and character that made such animosity as inevitable as the rising of the sun in the east of Oriente province where he had been born thirty-two years before.

Like George Herbert Walker Bush, Fidel was the son of privilege, but a peculiarly Cuban form of privilege, as different from the blue-blooded Bush variety as the hot and breathless climate of Oriente was from chilly New England. Like Bush, Fidel endured a father as parsimonious with his warmth as those New England winters. Young Fidelito grew up well acquainted with the back of Angel Castro's hand, the jeers of classmates who tormented him and his brother Raul for their illegitimacy. Though Angel Castro owned two thousand acres and had risen from common sugar cane laborer to local caudillo, he did not possess the easy assurance of the rich of Havana, for whom Oriente was the Cuban equivalent of Alabama. The Castros were peasants. Fidel's father was illiterate, his mother a maid. No amount of money could erase Fidel's bastardy.

This history raged in Fidelito. Always in a fight, alternating boasts with moody silences, he longed for accomplishment in a fiery way that cast the longing of Bush to impress his own father into a sickly shadow. At boarding school in Santiago, he sought the praise of his teachers and admiration of his schoolmates. At Belén, Havana's exclusive Jesuit preparatory school, he became the champion athlete of all of Cuba. "El Loco Fidel," his classmates called him as, late into the night, at an outdoor court under a light swarming with insects, he would practice

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basketball shots until his feet were torn bloody and his head swam with forlorn images of the ball glancing off the iron rim.

At the University of Havana, between the scorching expanses of the baseball and basketball seasons, Fidel toiled over the scorching expanse of the law books. He sought triumph in student politics as he did in sports. In the evenings he met in tiny rooms with his comrades and talked about junk pitches and electoral strategy, about the reforms that were only a matter of time because the people's will could not be forever thwarted. They were on the side of history. Larger than even the largest of men, history would overpower anyone unless, like Fidel, he aligned himself with it so as not to be swept under by the tidal force of its inescapable currents.

In the spring of 1948, at the same time George Herbert Walker Bush was shaking the hand of Babe Ruth, these currents transformed Fidel's life. He was being scouted by several major league teams. In the university he had gained control of his fast ball and given birth to a curve of so monstrous an arc that Alex Pompez, the Giants' scout, reported that the well-spoken law student owned "a hook like bo-peep." More significantly, Pirates' scout Howie Haak observed that Fidel "could throw and think at the same time."

Indeed Fidel could think, though no one could come close to guessing the content of his furious thought. A war between glory and doom raged within him. Fidel's fury to accomplish things threatened to keep him from accomplishing anything at all. He had made enemies. In the late forties, student groups punctuated elections for head of the law school class with assassinations. Rival political gangs fought in the streets. Events conspired to drive Fidel toward a crisis. And so, on a single day in 1948, he abandoned his political aspirations, quit school, married his lover, the fair Mirta Diaz Balart, and signed a contract with the New York Giants.

It seemed a fortunate choice. In his rookie year he won fifteen games. After he took the Cy Young Award and was named MVP of the 1951 Series the sports writers dubbed him "the Franchise." This past season he had won twenty-nine. He earned, and squandered, a fortune. Controversy dogged him, politics would not let him go, the uniform of a baseball player at times felt much too small. His brother Raul was imprisoned when Batista overthrew the government to avoid defeat in the election of 1952. Fidel made friends among the expatriates in Miami. He protested U.S. policies. His alternative nickname became "the Mouth."

But all along Fidel knew his politics was mere pose. His spouting off to sports reporters did nothing compared to what money might do to help the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra. Yet he had no money.

After the second game of the series, instead of returning to the hotel Fidel took a cab down to the Mall. He needed to be alone. It was early evening when he got out at the Washington Monument. The sky beyond the Lincoln Memorial shone orange and purple. The air still held some of the sultry heat of summer, like an evening in Havana. But this was

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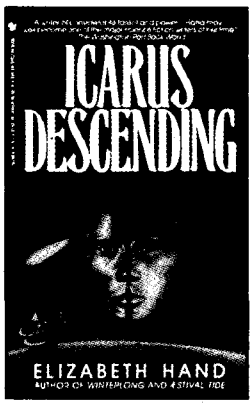

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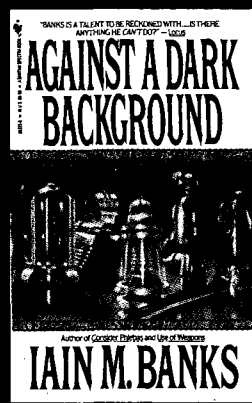
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a different sort of capital. These North Americans liked to think of themselves as clean, rational men of law instead of passion, a land of Washingtons and Lincolns, but away from the public buildings it was still a southern city full of ex-slaves. Fidel looked down the mall toward the bright Capitol, white and towering as a wedding cake, and wondered what he might have become had he continued law school. At one time he had imagined himself the Washington of his own country, a liberating warrior. The true heir of Jose Martí, scholar, poet, and revolutionary. Like Martí he admired the idealism of the United States, but like him he saw its dark side. Here at the Mall, however, you could almost forget about that in an atmosphere of bogus Greek democracy, of liberty and justice for all. You might even forget that this liberty could be bought and sold, a franchise purchasable for cold cash.

Fidel walked along the pool toward the Lincoln Memorial. The floodlights lit up the white columns, and inside shone upon the brooding figure of Lincoln. Despite his cynicism, Fidel was caught by the sight of it. He had only been to Washington once before, for the All Star Game in 1956. He remembered walking through Georgetown with Mirta on his arm, feeling tall and handsome, ignoring the scowl of the maitre d' in the restaurant who clearly disapproved of two such dark ones in his establishment.

He'd triumphed but was not satisfied. He had forced others to admit his primacy through the power of his will. He had shown them, with his strong arm, the difference between right and wrong. He was the Franchise. He climbed up the steps into the Memorial, read the words of Lincoln's Second Inaugural address engraved on the wall. THE PROGRESS OF OUR ARMS UPON WHICH ALL ELSE CHIEFLY DEPENDS IS AS WELL KNOWN TO THE PUBLIC AS TO MYSELF . . . But he was still the crazy Cuban, taken little more seriously than Desi Arnaz, and the minute that arm that made him a useful commodity should begin to show signs of weakening—in that same minute he would be undone. IT MAY SEEM STRANGE THAT ANY MEN SHOULD DARE TO ASK A JUST GOD'S ASSISTANCE IN WRINGING THEIR BREAD FROM THE SWEAT OF OTHER MEN'S FACES BUT LET US JUDGE NOT THAT WE BE NOT JUDGED.

Judge not? Perhaps Lincoln could manage it, but Fidel was a different sort of man.

In the secrecy of his mind Fidel could picture another world than the one he lived in. The marriage of love to Mirta had long since gone sour, torn apart by Fidel's lust for renown on the ball field and his lust for the astonishing women who fell like fruit from the trees into the laps of players such as he. More than once he felt grief over his faithlessness. He knew his solitude to be just punishment. That was the price of greatness, for, after all, greatness was a crime and deserved punishment.

Mirta was gone now, and their son with her. She worked for the hated Batista. He thought of Raul languishing in Batista's prison on the Isle of Pines. Batista, embraced by this United States that ran Latin America

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like a company store. Raul suffered for the people, while Fidel ate in four star restaurants and slept with a different woman in every city, throwing away his youth, and the money he earned with it, on excrement.

He looked up into the great sad face of Lincoln. He turned from the monument to stare out across the mall toward the gleaming white shaft of the Washington obelisk. It was full night now. Time to amend his life.

SIX

The headline in the *Post* the next morning read, *Senator Bush Evens Series*. The story mentioned that Prescott Bush had shown up in the sixth inning and sat beside Nixon in the Presidential box. But nothing more.

Bar decided not to go up to New York for the middle games of the series. George traveled with the team to the Roosevelt Hotel. The home run had done something for him. He felt a new confidence.

The game three starters were the veteran southpaw Johnny Antonelli for the Giants and Pedro Ramos for the Senators. The echoes of the national anthem had hardly faded when Allison led off for the Senators with a home run into the short porch in left field. The Polo Grounds fell dead silent. The Senators scored three runs in the first; George did his part, hitting a changeup into right center for a double, scoring the third run of the inning.

In the bottom half of the first the Giants came right back, tying it up on Mays's three-run homer.

After that the Giants gradually wore Ramos down, scoring a single run in the third and two in the fifth. Lavagetto pulled him for a pinch hitter in the sixth with George on third and Consolo at first, two outs. But Aspromonte struck out, ending the inning.

Though Castro heckled George mercilessly throughout the game and the brash New York fans joined in, he played above himself. The Giants eventually won 8-3, but George went three for five. Despite his miserable first game he was batting .307 for the series. Down two games to one, the Washington players felt the loss, but had stopped calling him "George Herbert Walker Bush," and started calling him "the Senator."

SEVEN

Lavagetto had set an eleven o'clock curfew but Billy Consolo persuaded George to go out on the town. The Hot Corner was a dive on Seventh Avenue with decent Italian food and cheap drinks. George ordered a club soda and tried to get into the mood. Ramos moaned about the plate umpire's strike zone and Consolo changed the subject.

Consolo had been a bonus boy; in 1953 the Red Sox had signed him right out of high school for $50,000. He had never panned out. George

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wondered if Consolo's career had been any easier to take than his own. At least nobody had hung enough expectations on George for him to be called a flop.

Stobbs was telling a story. "So the Baseball Annie says to him, 'But will you respect me in the morning?' and the shortstop says, 'Oh baby, I'll respect you like crazy!' "

While the others were laughing George headed for the men's room. Passing the bar, he saw, in a corner booth, Fidel Castro talking to a couple of men in slick suits. Castro's eyes flicked over him but registered no recognition.

When George came out the men in suits were in heated conversation with Castro. In the back of the room somebody dropped a quarter into the jukebox, and Elvis Presley's slinky "Money Honey" blared out. Bush had no use for rock and roll. He sat at the table, ignored his teammates' conversation, and kept an eye on Castro. The Cuban was strenuously making some point, stabbing the tabletop with his index finger. After a minute George noticed that someone at the bar was watching them too. It was the pale old man he had seen at Griffith Stadium.

On impulse, George went up to him. "Hello, old timer. You really must be a fan, if you followed the Series up here. Can I buy you a drink?"

The man turned decisively from watching Castro, as if deliberately putting aside some thought. He seemed about to smile but did not. Small red splotches colored his face. "Buy me a ginger ale."

George ordered a ginger ale and another club soda and sat on the next stool. "Money honey, if you want to get along with me," Elvis sang.

The old man sipped his drink. "You had yourself a couple of good games," he said. "You're in the groove."

"I just got some lucky breaks."

"Don't kid me. I know how it feels when it's going right. You know just where the next pitch is going to be, and there it is. Somebody hits a line drive right at you, you throw out your glove and snag it without even thinking. You're in the groove."

"It comes from playing the game a long time."

The old man snorted. "Do you really believe this guff you spout? Or are you just trying to hide something?"

"What do you mean? I've spent ten years playing baseball."

"And you expect me to believe you still don't know anything about it? Experience doesn't explain the groove." The man looked as if he were watching something far away. "When you're in that groove you're not playing the game, the game is playing you."

"But you have to plan your moves."

The old man looked at him as if he were from Mars. "Do you plan your moves when you're making love to your wife?" He finished his ginger ale, took another look back at Castro, then left.

Everyone, it seemed, knew what was wrong with him. George felt steamed. As if that wasn't enough, as soon as he returned to the table Castro's pals left and the Cuban swaggered over to George, leaned into

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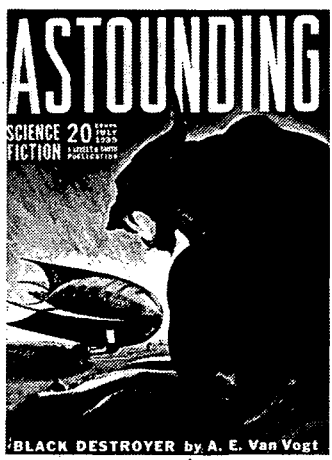

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him and blew cigar smoke into his face. "I know you, George Herbert Walker Bush," he said, "Sen-a-tor Rabbit. The rich man's son."

George pushed him away. "You know, I'm beginning to find your behavior darned unconscionable, compadre."

"I stand here quaking with fear," Castro said. He poked George in the chest. "Back home in Biran we had a pen for the pigs. The gate of this pen was in disrepair. But it is still a fact, Senator Rabbit, that the splintered wooden gate of that pig pen, squealing on its rusted hinges, swung better than you."

Consolo started to get up, but George put a hand on his arm. "Say, Billy, our Cuban friend here didn't by any chance help you pick out this restaurant tonight, did he?"

"What, are you crazy? Of course not."

"Too bad. I thought if he did, we could get some good Communist food here."

The guys laughed. Castro leaned over.

"Very funny, Machismo Zero." His breath reeked of cigar smoke, rum and garlic. "I guarantee that after tomorrow's game you will be even funnier."

EIGHT

Fidel had never felt sharper than he did during his warmups the afternoon of the fourth game. It was a cool fall day, partial overcast with a threat of rain, a breeze blowing out to right. The chill air only invigorated him. Never had his curve had more bite, his screwball more movement. His arm felt supple, his legs strong. As he strode in from the bull pen to the dugout, squinting out at the apartment buildings on Coogan's Bluff towering over the stands, a great cheer rose from the crowd.

Before the echoes of the national anthem had died he walked the first two batters, on eight pitches. The fans murmured. Schmidt came out to talk with him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," Fidel said, sending him back.

He retired Lemon on a pop fly and Killebrew on a fielder's choice. Bush came to the plate with two outs and men on first and second. The few Washington fans who had braved the Polo Grounds set up a chant: "SEN-a-TOR, SEN-a-TOR!"

Fidel studied Bush. Beneath Bush's bravado he could see panic in every motion of the body he wore like an ill-fitting suit. Fidel struck him out on three pitches.

Kralick held the Giants scoreless through three innings.

As the game progressed Fidel's own personal game, the game of pitcher and batter, settled into a pattern. Fidel mowed down the batters after Bush in the order with predictable dispatch, but fell into trouble each time he faced the top of the order, getting just enough outs to bring Bush

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up with men on base and the game in the balance. He did this four times in the first seven innings.

Each time Bush struck out.

In the middle of the seventh, after Bush fanned to end the inning, Mays sat down next to Fidel on the bench. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Mays was the only player on the Giants whose stature rivaled that of the Franchise. Fidel, whose success came as much from craft as physical prowess, could not but admit that Mays was the most beautiful ball player he had ever seen. "I'm shutting out the Washington Senators in the fourth game of the World Series," Fidel said.

"What's this mickey mouse with Bush? You trying to make him look bad?"

"One does not have to try very hard."

"Well, cut it out—before you make a mistake with Killebrew or Sievers."

Fidel looked him dead in the eyes. "I do not make mistakes."

The Giants entered the ninth with a 3-0 lead. Fidel got two quick outs, then gave up a single to Sievers and walked Lemon and Killebrew to load the bases. Bush, at bat, represented the lead run. Schmidt called time and came out again. Rigney hurried out from the dugout, and Mays, to the astonishment of the crowd, came all the way in from center. "Yank him," he told Rigney.

Rigney looked exasperated. "Who's managing this team, Willie?"

"He's setting Bush up to be the goat."

Rigney looked at Fidel. Fidel looked at him. "Just strike him out," the manager said.

Fidel rubbed up the ball and threw three fastballs through the heart of the plate. Bush missed them all. By the last strike the New York fans were screaming, rocking the Polo Grounds with a parody of the Washington chant: "Sen-a-TOR, Sen-a-TOR, BUSH, BUSH, BUSH!" and exploding into fits of laughter. The Giants led the series, 3-1.

NINE

George made the cabbie drop him off at the corner of Broadway and Pine, in front of the old Trinity Church. He walked down Wall Street through crowds of men in dark suits, past the stock exchange to the offices of Brown Brothers, Harriman. In the shadows of the buildings the fall air felt wintery. He had not been down here in more years than he cared to remember.

The secretary Miss Goode greeted him warmly; she still remembered him from his days at Yale. Despite Prescott Bush's move to the Senate, they still kept his inner office for him, and as George stood outside the door he heard a piano. His father was singing. He had a wonderful singing voice, of which he was too proud.

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George entered. Prescott Bush sat at an upright piano, playing Gilbert and Sullivan:

"Go, ye heroes, go to glory
Though you die in combat gory,
Ye shall live in song and story.
Go to immortality!"

Still playing, he glanced over his shoulder at George, then turned back and finished the verse:

"Go to death, and go to slaughter;
Die, and every Cornish daughter
With her tears your grave shall water.
Go, ye heroes, go and die!"

George was all too familiar with his father's theatricality. Six feet four inches tall, with thick salt and pepper hair and a handsome, craggy face, he carried off his Douglas Fairbanks imitation without any hint of self-consciousness. It was a quality George had tried to emulate his whole life.

Prescott adjusted the sheet music and swiveled his piano stool around. He waved at the sofa against the wall beneath his shelf of golfing trophies and photos of the Yale Glee Club. "Sit down, son. I'm glad you could make it. I know you must have a lot on your mind."

George remained standing. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Relax, George. This isn't the dentist's office."

"If it were I would know what to expect."

"Well, one thing you can expect is to hear me tell you how proud I am."

"Proud? Did you see that game yesterday?"

Prescott Bush waved a hand. "Temporary setback. I'm sure you'll get them back this afternoon."

"Isn't it a little late for compliments?"

Prescott looked at him as calmly as if he were appraising some stock portfolio. His bushy eyebrows quirked a little higher. "George, I want you to sit down and shut up."

Despite himself, George sat. Prescott got up and paced to the window, looked down at the street, then started pacing again, his big hands knotted behind his back. George began to dread what was coming.

"George, I have been indulgent of you. Your entire life, despite my misgivings, I have treated you with kid gloves. You are not a stupid boy; at least your grades in school suggested you weren't. You've got that Phi Beta Kappa key, too—which only goes to show you what they are worth." He held himself very erect. "How old are you now?"

"Thirty-five."

Prescott shook his head. "Thirty-five? Lord. At *thirty-five* you show no

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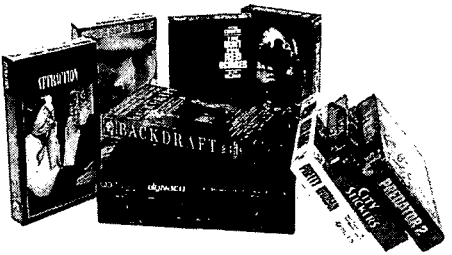

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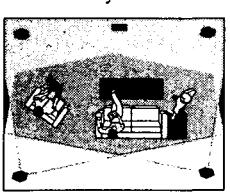

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more sense than you did at seventeen, when you told me that you intended to enlist in the Navy. Despite the fact that the Secretary of War himself, God-forbid-me *Franklin D. Roosevelt's* Secretary of War, had just told the graduating class that you, the cream of the nation's youth, could best serve your country by going to college instead of getting shot up on some Pacific island."

He strolled over to the piano, flipped pensively through the sheet music on top. "I remember saying to myself that day that maybe you knew something I didn't. You were young. I recalled my own recklessness in the first war. God knew we needed to lick the Japanese. But that didn't mean a boy of your parts and prospects should do the fighting. I prayed you'd survive and that by the time you came back you'd have grown some sense." Prescott closed the folder of music and faced him.

George, as he had many times before, instead of looking into his father's eyes looked at a point beyond his left ear. At the moment, just past that ear he could see half of a framed photograph of one of his father's singing groups. Probably the Silver Dollar Quartet. He could not make out the face of the man on the end of the photo. Some notable businessman, no doubt. A man who sat on four boards of directors making decisions that could topple the enconomies of six banana republics while he went to the club to shoot eight handicap golf. Someone like Prescott Bush.

"When you chose this baseball career," his father said, "I finally realized you had serious problems facing reality. I would think the dismal history of your involvement in this sport might have taught you something. Now, by the grace of God and sheer luck you find yourself, on the verge of your middle years, in the spotlight. I can't imagine how it happened. But I know one thing: you must take advantage of this situation. You must seize the brass ring before the carousel stops. As soon as the Series is over I want you to take up a career in politics."

George stopped looking at the photo. His father's eyes were on his. "Politics? But dad, I thought I could become a coach."

"A coach?"

"A coach. I don't know anything about politics. I'm a baseball player. Nobody is going to elect a baseball player."

Prescott Bush stepped closer. He made a fist, beginning to be carried away by his own rhetoric. "Twenty years ago, maybe, you would be right. But George, times are changing. People want an attractive face. They want somebody famous. It doesn't matter so much what they've done before. Look at Eisenhower. He had no experience of government. The only reason he got elected was because he was a war hero. Now, you're a war hero, or at least we can dress you up into a reasonable facsimile of one. You're Yale educated, a brainy boy. You've got breeding and class. You're not bad looking. And thanks to this children's game, you're famous—for the next two weeks, anyway. So after the series, we strike while the iron's hot. You retire from baseball. File for Congress on the Republican ticket in the third Connecticut district."

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"But I don't even live in Connecticut."

"Don't be contrary, George. You're a baseball player; you live on the road. Your last stable residence before you took up this, this—baseball—was New Haven. I've held an apartment there for years in your name. That's good enough for the people we're going to convince."

His father towered over him. George got up, retreated toward the window. "But I don't know anything about politics!"

"So? You'll learn. Despite the fact I've been against your playing baseball, I have to say that it will work well for you. It's the national game. Every kid in the country wants to be a ball player, most of the adults do too. It's hard enough for people from our class to overcome the prejudice against money, George. Baseball gives you the common touch. Why, you'll probably be the only Republican in the Congress ever to have showered with a Negro. On a regular basis, I mean."

"I don't even like politics."

"George, there are only two kinds of people in the world, the employers and the employees. You were born and bred to the former. I will not allow you to persist in degrading yourself into one of the latter."

"Dad, really, I appreciate your trying to look out for me. Don't get me wrong, gratitude's my middle name. But I love baseball. There's some big opportunities there, I think. Down in Chattanooga I made some friends. I think I can be a good coach, and eventually I'll wear a manager's uniform."

Prescott Bush stared at him. George remembered that look when he'd forgotten to tie off the sailboat one summer up in Kennebunkport. He began to wilt. Eventually his father shook his head. "It comes to me at last that you do not possess the wits that God gave a Newfoundland retriever."

George felt his face flush. He looked away. "You're just jealous because I did what you never had the guts to do. What about you and your golf? You, you—dilettante! I'm going to be a manager!"

"George, if I want to I can step into that outer office, pick up the telephone and in fifteen minutes set in motion a chain of events that will guarantee you won't get a job mopping toilets in the clubhouse."

George retreated to the window. "You think you can run my life? You just want me to be another appendage of Senator Bush. Well, you can forget it! I'm not your boy anymore."

"You'd rather spend the rest of your life letting men like this Communist Castro make a fool of you?"

George caught himself before he could completely lose his temper. Feeling hopeless, he drummed his knuckles on the window sill, staring down into the narrow street. Down below them brokers and bankers hustled from meeting to meeting trying to make a buck. He might have been one of them. Would his father have been any happier?

He turned. "Dad, you don't know anything. Try for once to understand. I've never been so alive as I've been for moments—just moments out of eleven years—on the ball field. It's truly American."

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"I agree with you, George—it's as American as General Motors. Baseball is a product. You players are the assembly line workers who make it. But you refuse to understand that, and that's your undoing. Time eats you up, and you end up in the dust bin, a wasted husk."

George felt the helpless fury again. "Dad, you've got to—"

"Are you going to tell me I *have to* do something, George?" Prescott Bush sat back down at the piano, tried a few notes. He peeked over his shoulder at George, unsmiling, and began again to sing:

"Go and do your best endeavor,
And before all links we sever;
We will say farewell for ever.
Go to glory and the grave!

For your foes are fierce and ruthless,
False, unmerciful and truthless.
Young and tender, old and toothless,
All in vain their mercy crave."

George stalked out of the room, through the secretary's office and down the corridor toward the elevators. It was all he could do to keep from punching his fist through the rosewood paneling. He felt his pulse thrumming in his temples, slowing as he waited for the dilatory elevator to arrive, rage turning to depression.

Riding down he remembered something his mother had said to him twenty years before. He'd been one of the best tennis players at the River Club in Kennebunkport. One summer, in front of the whole family, he lost a championship match. He knew he'd let them down, and tried to explain to his mother that he'd only been off his game.

"You don't have a game," she'd said.

The elevator let him out into the lobby. On Seventh Avenue he stepped into a bar and ordered a beer. On the TV in the corner, sound turned low, an announcer was going over the highlights of the Series. The TV switched to an image of some play in the field. George heard a reference to "Senator Bush," but he couldn't tell which one of them they were talking about.

TEN

A few of the pitchers, including Camilo Pascual, the young right hander who was to start game five, were the only others in the clubhouse when George showed up. The tone was grim. Nobody wanted to talk about how their season might be over in a few hours. Instead they talked fishing.

Pascual was nervous; George was keyed tighter than a Christmas toy. Ten years of obscurity, and now hero one day, goat the next. The memory

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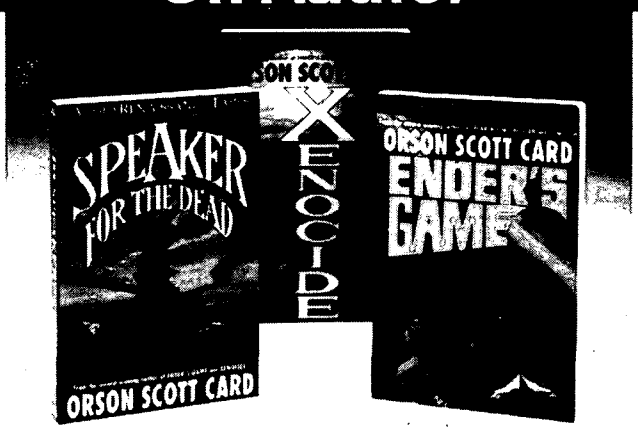

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of his teammates' hollow words of encouragement as he'd slumped back into the dugout each time Castro struck him out made George want to crawl into his locker and hide. The supercilious brown bastard. What kind of man would go out of his way to humiliate him?

Stobbs sauntered in, whistling. He crouched into a batting stance, swung an imaginary Louisville slugger through Kralick's head, then watched it sail out into the imaginary bleachers. "Hey guys, I got an idea," he said. "If we get the lead today, let's call time out."

But they didn't get the lead. By the top of the second, they were down 3-0. But Pascual, on the verge of being yanked, settled down. The score stayed frozen through six. The Senators finally got to Jones in the seventh when Allison doubled and Killebrew hit a towering home run into the bullpen in left center: 3–2, Giants. Meanwhile the Senators' shaky relief pitching held, as the Giants stranded runners in the sixth and eighth and hit into three double plays.

By the top of the ninth the Giants still clung to the 3-2 lead, three outs away from winning the Series, and the rowdy New York fans were gearing up for a celebration. The Senators' dugout was grim, but they had the heart of the order up: Sievers, Lemon, Killebrew. Between them they had hit ninety-four home runs that season. They had also struck out almost three hundred times.

Rigney went out to talk to Jones, then left him in, though he had Stu Miller up and throwing in the bullpen. Sievers took the first pitch for a strike, fouled off the second and went down swinging at a high fastball. The crowd roared.

Lemon went into the hole 0-2, worked the count even and grounded out to second.

The crowd, on its feet, chanted continuously now. Fans pounded on the dugout roof, and the din was deafening. Killebrew stepped into the batter's box, and George moved up to the on deck circle. On one knee in the dirt, he bowed his head and prayed that Killer would get on base.

"He's praying!" Castro shouted from the Giants' dugout. "Well might you pray, Sen-a-tor Bush!"

Killebrew called time and spat toward the Giants. The crowd screamed abuse at him. He stepped back into the box. Jones went into his windup. Killebrew took a tremendous cut and missed. The next pitch was a changeup that Killebrew mistimed and slammed five hundred feet down the left field line into the upper deck—foul. The crowd quieted. Jones stepped off the mound, wiped his brow, shook off a couple of signs and threw another fastball that Killebrew slapped into right for a single.

That was it for Jones. Rigney called in Miller. Lavagetto came out and spoke to George. "All right. He won't try anything tricky. Look for the fastball."

George nodded and Lavagetto bounced back into the dugout. "Come on, George Herbert Walker Bush!" Consolo yelled. George tried to ignore the crowd and the Giants heckling while Miller warmed up. His stomach was tied into twelve knots. He avoided looking into the box seats where

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he knew his father sat. Politics. What the blazes did he want with politics?

Finally Miller was ready. "Play ball!" the ump yelled. George stepped into the box.

He didn't wait. The first pitch was a fastball. He turned on it, made contact, but got too far under it. The ball soared out into left, a high, lazy fly. George slammed down his bat and, heart sinking, legged it out. The crowd cheered, and Alou was circling back to make the catch. George was rounding first, his head down, when he heard a stunned groan from fifty thousand throats at once. He looked up to see Alou slam his glove to the ground. Miller, on the mound, did the same. The Senators' dugout was leaping insanity. Somehow, the ball had carried far enough to drop into the overhanging upper deck, 250 feet away. Home run. Senators lead, 4-3.

"Lucky bastard!" Castro shouted as Bush rounded third.

Stobbs shut them down in the ninth and the Senators won.

ELEVEN

SENATOR BUSH SAVES WASHINGTON! the headlines screamed. *Makes Castro See Red.* They were comparing it to the 1923 series, held in these same Polo Grounds, where Casey Stengel, a thirty-two-year-old outfielder who'd spent twelve years in the majors without doing anything that might cause anyone to remember him, batted .417 and hit home runs to win two games.

Reporters stuck to him like flies on sugar. The pressure of released humiliation loosened George's tongue. "I know Castro's type," he said, snarling what he hoped was a good imitation of a manly snarl. "At the wedding he's the bride, at the funeral he's the dead person. You know, the corpse. That kind of poor sportsmanship just burns me up. But I've been around. He can't get my goat because of where I've got it in the guts department."

The papers ate it up. Smart money had said the Series would never go back to Washington. Now they were on the train to Griffith Stadium, and if the Senators were going to lose, at least the home fans would have the pleasure of going through the agony in person.

Game six was a slugfest. Five homers: McCovey, Mays, and Cepeda for the Giants; Naragon and Lemon for the Senators. Kaat and Antonelli were both knocked out early. The lead changed back and forth three times.

George hit three singles, a sacrifice fly, and drew a walk. He scored twice. The Senators came from behind to win 10-8. In the ninth, George sprained his ankle sliding into third. It was all he could do to hobble into the locker room after the game.

"It doesn't hurt," George told the reporters. "Bar always says, and she knows me better than anybody, go ahead and ask around, 'You're the

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game one, George.' Not the gamey one, mind you!" He laughed, smiled a crooked smile.

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," he told them. "That strong but silent type of thing. My father said so."

TWELVE

Fonseca waited until Fidel emerged into the twilight outside the Fifth Street stadium exit. As Fonseca approached, his hand on the slick automatic in his overcoat pocket, his mind cast back to their political years in Havana, where young men such as they, determined to seek prominence, would be as likely to face the barrel of a pistol as an electoral challenge. Ah, nostalgia.

"Pretty funny, that sen-a-TOR Bush," Fonseca said. He shoved Fidel back toward the exit. Nobody was around.

If Fidel was scared, a slight narrowing of his eyes was the only sign. "What is this about?"

"Not a thing. Raul says hello."

"Hello to Raul."

"Mirta says hello, too."

"You haven't spoken to her." Fidel took a cigar from his mohair jacket, fished a knife from a pocket, trimmed off the end and lit it with a battered Zippo. "She doesn't speak with exiled radicals. Or mobsters."

Fonseca was impressed by the performance. "Are you going to do this job, finally?"

"I can only do my half. One cannot make a sow look like a ballet dancer."

"It is not apparent to our friends that you're doing your half."

"Tell them I am truly frightened, Luis." He blew a plume of smoke. It was dark now, almost full night. "Meanwhile, I am hungry. Let me buy you a Washington dinner."

The attitude was all too typical of Fidel, and Fonseca was sick of it. He had fallen under Fidel's spell back in the university, thought him some sort of great man. In 1948 his self-regard could be justified as necessary boldness. But when the head of the National Sports Directory was shot dead in the street, Fonseca had not been the only one to think Fidel was the killer. It was a gesture of suicidal machismo of the sort that Fidel admired. Gunmen scoured the streets for them. While Fonseca hid in a series of airless apartments, Fidel got a quick tryout with the Giants, married Mirta and abandoned Havana, leaving Fonseca and their friends to deal with the consequences.

"If you don't take care, Fidel, our friends will buy you a Washington grave."

"They are not my friends—or yours."

"No, they aren't. But this was our choice, and you have to go through with it." Fonseca watched a beat cop stop at the corner, then turn away

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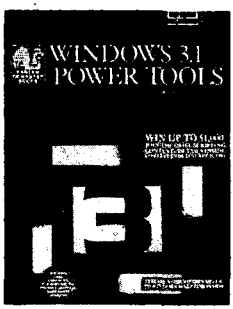

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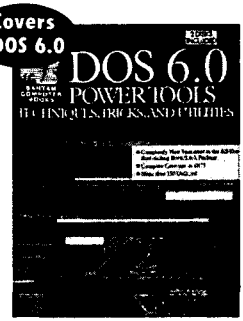

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down the street. He moved closer, stuck the pistol into Fidel's ribs. "You know, Fidel, I have a strong desire to shoot you right now. Who cares about the World Series? It would be pleasant just to see you bleed."

The tip of Fidel's cigar glowed in the dark. "This Bush would be no hero then."

"But I would be."

"You would be a traitor."

Fonseca laughed. "Don't say that word again. It evokes too many memories." He plucked the cigar from Fidel's hand, threw it onto the sidewalk. "Athletes should not smoke."

He pulled the gun back, drew his hand from his overcoat, and crossed the street.

THIRTEEN

The night before, the Russians announced they had shot down a U.S. spy plane over the Soviet Union. A pack of lies, President Nixon said. No such planes existed.

Meanwhile, on the clubhouse radio, a feverish announcer was discussing strategy for game seven. A flock of telegrams had arrived to urge the Senators on. Tacked on the bulletin board in the locker room, they gave pathetic glimpses into the hearts of the thousands who had for years tied their sense of well being to the fate of a punk team like the Senators.

Show those racially polluted commie-symps what Americans stand for.

My eight year old son, crippled by polio, sits up in his wheelchair so that he can watch the games on TV.

Jesus Christ, creator of the heavens and earth, is with you.

As George laced up his spikes over his aching ankle in preparation for the game, thinking about facing Castro one last time, it came to him that he was terrified.

In the last week he had entered an atmosphere he had not lived in since Yale. He was a hero. People had expectations of him. He was admired and courted. If he had received any respect before, it was the respect given to someone who refused to quit when every indication shouted he ought to try something else. He did not have the braggadocio of a Castro. Yet here, miraculously, he was shining.

Except he *knew* that Castro was better than he was, and he knew that anybody who really knew the game knew it too. He knew that this week was a fluke, a strange conjunction of the stars that had knocked him into the "groove," as the old man in the bar had said. It could evaporate at any instant. It could already have evaporated.

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Lavagetto and Mr. Griffith came in and turned off the radio. "Okay, boys," Lavagetto said. "People in this city been waiting a long time for this game. A lot of you been waiting your whole careers for it, and you younger ones might not get a lot of chances to play in the seventh game of the World Series. Nobody gave us a chance to be here today, but here we are. Let's make the most of it, go out there and kick the blazes out of them, then come back in and drink some champagne!"

The team whooped and headed out to the field.

Coming up the tunnel, the sound of cleats scraping damp concrete, the smell of stale beer and mildew, Bush could see a sliver of the bright grass and white baselines, the outfield fence and crowds in the bleachers, sunlight so bright it hurt his eyes. When the team climbed the dugout steps onto the field, a great roar rose from the throats of the thirty thousand fans. He had never heard anything so beautiful, or frightening. The concentrated focus of their hope swelled George's chest with unnameable emotion, brought tears to his eyes, and he ducked his head and slammed his fist into his worn first baseman's glove.

The teams lined up on the first and third baselines for the National Anthem. The fans began cheering even before the last line of the song faded away, and George jogged to first, stepping on the bag for good luck. His ankle twinged; his whole leg felt hot. Ramos finished his warmups, the umpire yelled "Play ball!" and they began.

Ramos set the Giants down in order in the top of the first. In the home half Castro gave up a single to Allison, who advanced to third on a single by Lemon. Killebrew walked. Bush came up with bases loaded, one out. He managed a fly ball to right, and Allison beat the throw to the plate. Castro stuck out Bertoia to end the inning. 1-0, Senators.

Ramos retired the Giants in order in the second. In the third, Lemon homered to make it 2-0.

Castro had terrific stuff, but seemed to be struggling with his control. Or else he was playing games again. By the fourth inning he had seven strikeouts to go along with the two runs he'd given up. He shook off pitch after pitch, and Schmidt went out to argue with him. Rigney talked to him in the dugout, and the big Cuban waved his arms as if emphatically arguing his case.

Schmidt homered for the Giants in the fourth, but Ramos was able to get out of the inning without further damage. Senators, 2-1.

In the bottom of the fourth, George came up with a man on first. Castro struck him out on a high fastball that George missed by a foot.

In the Giants' fifth, Spencer doubled off the wall in right. Alou singled him home to tie the game and one out later Mays launched a triple over Allison's head into the deepest corner of center field, just shy of the crazy wall protecting Mrs. Mahan's back yard. Giants up, 3-2. The crowd groaned. As he walked out to the mound, Lavagetto was already calling for a left hander to face McCovey. Ramos kicked the dirt, handed him the ball and headed to the showers, and Stobbs came on to pitch to

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McCovey. He got McCovey on a weak grounder to George at first, and Davenport on a pop fly.

The Senators failed to score in the bottom of the fifth and sixth, but in the seventh George, limping for real now, doubled in Killer to tie the game, and was driven home, wincing as he forced weight down on his ankle, on a single by Naragon. Senators 4-3. The crowd roared.

Rigney came out to talk to Castro, but Castro convinced him to let him stay in. He'd struck out twelve already, and the Giants' bullpen was depleted after the free-for-all in game six.

The score stayed that way through the eighth. By the top of the ninth the crowd was going wild in the expectation of a world championship. Lavagetto had pulled Stobbs, who sat next to Bush in his warmup jacket, and put in the righthander Hyde, who'd led the team in saves.

The Giants mounted another rally. On the first pitch, Spencer laid a bunt down the first base line. Hyde stumbled coming off the mound and George, taken completely by surprise, couldn't get to it on his bad foot. He got up limping and the trainer came out to ask him if he could play. George was damned if he would let it end so pitifully, and shook him off. Alou grounded to first, Spencer advancing. Cepeda battled the count full, then walked.

Mays stepped into the box. Hyde picked up the rosin bag, walked off the mound and rubbed up the ball. George could see he was sweating. He stepped back onto the rubber, took the sign and threw a high fastball that Mays hit four hundred feet, high into the bleachers in left. The Giants leapt out of the dugout, slapping Mays on the back, congratulating each other. The fans tore their clothing in despair, slumped into their seats, cursed and moaned. The proper order had been restored to the universe. George looked over at Castro, who sat in the dugout impassively. Lavagetto came out to talk to Hyde; the crowd booed when the manager left him in, but Hyde managed to get them out of the inning without further damage. As the Senators left the field the organist tried to stir the crowd, but despair had settled over them like a lead blanket. Giants, 6-4.

In the dugout Lavagetto tried to get them up for the inning. "This is it, gentlemen. Time to prove we belong here."

Allison had his bat out and was ready to go to work before the umpire had finished sweeping off the plate. Castro threw three warmups and waved him into the box. When Allison lined a single between short and third, the crowd cheered and rose to its feet. Sievers, swinging for the fences, hit a nubbler to the mound, a sure double play. Castro pounced on it in good time, but fumbled the ball, double clutched, and settled for the out at first. The fans cheered.

Rigney came out to talk it over. He and Schmidt stayed on the mound a long time, Castro gesturing wildly, insisting he wasn't tired. He had struck out the side in the eighth.

Rigney left him in, and Castro rewarded him by striking out Lemon for his seventeenth of the game, a new World Series record. Two down.

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Killebrew was up. The fans hovered on the brink of nervous collapse. The Senators were torturing them; they were going to drag this out to the last fatal out, not give them a clean killing or a swan dive fade—no, they would hold out the chance of victory to the last moment, then crush them dead.

Castro rubbed up the ball, checked Allison over his shoulder, shook off a couple of Schmidt's signs and threw. He got Killebrew in an 0-2 hole, then threw four straight balls to walk him. The crowd noise reached a frenzy.

And so, as he stepped to the plate in the bottom of the ninth, two outs, George Herbert Walker Bush represented the winning run, the potential end to twenty-seven years of Washington frustration, the apotheosis of his life in baseball, or the ignominious end of it. Castro had him set up again, to be the glorious goat for the entire Series. His ankle throbbed. "C'mon, Senator!" Lavagetto shouted. "Make me a genius!"

Castro threw a fat hanging curve. George swung. As he did, he felt the last remaining strength of the dying Babe Ruth course down his arms. The ball kissed off the sweet spot of the bat and soared, pure and white as a six-year-old's prayer, into the left field bleachers.

The stands exploded. Fans boiled onto the field even before George touched second. Allison did a kind of hopping balletic dance around the bases ahead of him, a cross between Nureyev and a man on a pogo stick. The Senators ran out of the dugout and bearhugged George as he staggered around third; like a broken field runner he struggled through the fans toward home. A weeping fat man in a plaid shirt, face contorted by ecstasy, blocked his way to the plate and it was all he could do to keep from knocking him over.

As his teammates pulled him toward the dugout, he caught a glimpse over his shoulder of the Franchise standing on the mound, watching the melee and George at the center of it with an inscrutable expression on his face. Then George was pulled back into the happy maelstrom and surrendered to his bemused joy.

FOURTEEN

Long after everyone had left and the clubhouse was deserted, Fidel dressed, and instead of leaving walked back out to the field. The stadium was dark, but in the light of the moon he could make out the trampled infield and the obliterated basepaths. He stood on the mound and looked around at the empty stands. He was about to leave when someone called him from the dugout. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Fidel approached. It was a thin man in his sixties. He wore a sporty coat and a white dress shirt open at the collar. "Yes?" Fidel asked.

"The field is beautiful."

Fidel sat next to him on the bench. They stared across the diamond.

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The wind rustled the trees beyond the outfield walls. "Some people think so," Fidel said.

"I thought we might have a talk," the man said. "I've been waiting around the ball park before the last few games trying to get hold of you."

"I don't think we have anything to talk about, Mr. . . ."

"Weaver. Buck Weaver."

"Mr. Weaver. I don't know you, and you don't know me."

The man came close to smiling. "I know about winning the World Series. And losing it. I was on the winning team in 1917, and the losing one in 1919."

"You would not be kidding me, old man?"

"No. For a long time after the second one, I couldn't face a ball park. Especially during the Series. I might have gone to quite a few, but I couldn't make myself do it. Now I go to the games every chance I get."

"You still enjoy baseball."

"I love the game. It reminds me where my body is buried." As he said all of this the man kept smiling, as if it were a funny story he was telling, and a punchline waited in the near future.

"You should quit teasing me, old man," Fidel said. "You're still alive."

"To all outward indications I'm alive, most of the year now. For a long time I was dead the year round. Eventually I was dead only during the summer, and now it's come down to just the Series."

"You are the mysterious one. Why do you not simply tell me what you want with me?"

"I want to know why you did what you just did."

"What did I do?"

"You threw the game."

Fidel watched him. "You cannot prove that."

"I don't have to prove it. I know it, though."

"How do you know it?"

"Because I've seen it done before."

From somewhere in his boyhood, Fidel recalled the name, now. Buck Weaver. The 1919 series. "The Black Sox. You were one of them."

That appeared to be the punchline. The man smiled. His eyes were set in painful nets of wrinkles. "I was never one of them. But I knew about it, and that was enough for that bastard Landis to kick me out of the game."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"At first I wanted to stop you. Now I just want to know why you did it. Are you so blind to what you've got that you could throw it away? You're not a fool. Why?"

"I have my reasons, old man. Eighty thousand dollars, for one."

"You don't need the money."

"My brother, in prison, does. The people in my home do."

"Don't give me that. You don't really care about them."

Fidel let the moment stretch, listening to the rustling of the wind through the trees, the traffic in the distant street. "No? Well, perhaps.

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Perhaps I did it just because I *could*. Because the game betrayed me, because I wanted to show it is as corrupt as the *mierda* around it. It's not any different from the world. You know how it works. How every team has two black ball players—the star and the star's roommate." He laughed. "It's not a religion, and this place—" he gestured at Griffith Stadium looming in the night before them, "—is not a cathedral."

"I thought that way, when I was angry," Weaver said. "I was a young man. I didn't know how much it meant to me until they took it away."

"Old man, you would have lost it regardless. How old were you? Twenty-five? Thirty? In ten years it would have been taken from you anyway, and you'd be in the same place you are now."

"But I'd have my honor. I wouldn't be a disgrace."

"That's only what other people say. Why should you let their ignorance affect who you are?"

"Brave words. But I've lived it. You haven't—yet." Plainly upset, Weaver walked out onto the field to stand at third base. He crouched; he looked in toward the plate. After a while he straightened, a frail old man, and called in toward Fidel: "When I was twenty-five, I stood out here; I thought I had hold of a baseball in my hand. It turned out it had hold of me."

He came back and stood at the top of the dugout steps. "Don't worry, I'm not going to tell. I didn't then, and I won't now."

Weaver left, and Fidel sat in the dugout.

FIFTEEN

They used the photo of George's painfully shy, crooked smile, a photograph taken in the locker room after he'd been named MVP of the 1959 World Series, on his first campaign poster.

In front of the photographers and reporters, George was greeted by Mr. Griffith. And his father. Prescott Bush wore a political smile as broad as his experience of what was necessary to impress the world. He put his arm around his son's shoulders, and although George was a tall man, it was apparent that his father was still a taller one.

"I'm proud of you, son," Prescott said, in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone. "You've shown the power of decency and persistence in the face of hollow boasts."

Guys were spraying champagne, running around with their hair sticky and their shirts off, whooping and shouting and slapping each other on the back. Even his father's presence couldn't entirely deflect George's satisfaction. He had done it. Proved himself for once and for all. He wished Bar and the boys could be there. He wanted to shout in the streets, to stay up all night, be pursued by beautiful women. He sat in front of his locker and patiently answered the reporters' questions at length, repeatedly. Only gradually did the furor settle down. George

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glanced across the room to the brightly lit corner where Prescott was talking, on camera, with a television reporter.

It was clear that his father was setting him up for this planned political career. It infuriated him that he assumed he could control George so easily, but at the same time George felt confused about what he really wanted for himself. As he sat there in the diminishing chaos, Lavagetto came over and sat down beside him. The manager was still high from the victory.

"I don't believe it!" Lavagetto said. "I thought he was crazy, but old Tricky Dick must have known something I didn't!"

"What do you mean?"

"Mean?—nothing. Just that the president called after the first game and told me to bat you behind Killebrew. I thought he was crazy. But it paid off."

George remembered Prescott Bush whispering into Nixon's ear. He felt a crushing weight on his chest. He stared over at his father in the TV lights, not hearing Lavagetto.

But as he watched, he wondered. If his father had indeed fixed the Series, then everything he'd accomplished came to nothing. But his father was an honorable man. Besides, Nixon was noted for his sports obsession, full of fantasies because he hadn't succeeded himself. His calling Lavagetto was the kind of thing he would do anyway. Winning had been too hard for it to be a setup. No, Castro had wanted to humiliate George, and George had stood up to him.

The reporter finished talking to his father; the TV lights snapped off. George thanked Lavagetto for the faith the manager had shown in him, and limped over to Prescott Bush.

"Feeling pretty good, George?"

"It was a miracle we won. I played above myself."

"Now, don't take what I said back in New York so much to heart. You proved yourself equal to the challenge, that's what." Prescott lowered his voice: "Have you thought any more about the proposition I put to you?"

George looked his father in the eye. If Prescott Bush felt any discomfort, there was no trace of it in his patrician's gaze.

"I guess maybe I've played enough baseball," George said.

His father put his hand on George's shoulder; it felt like a burden. George shrugged it off and headed for the showers.

Many years later, as he faced the Washington press corps in the East Room of the White House, George Herbert Walker Bush was to remember that distant afternoon, in the ninth inning of the seventh game of the World Series, when he'd stood in the batter's box against the Franchise. He had not known then what he now understood: that, like his father, he would do anything to win. ●

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When is she getting back? I'm starving.

Time Traveler's Aid. Hold please. Time Traveler's Aid, how may I help you? Let me check. Yes, he did leave a message. You're to meet him at 1130, at the Basilica in Rome. . . . Dresses for men and women. You're welcome. Thanks for holding. Well, my personal recommendation for petty cash is to pick up a *Racing Form,* hop back to yesterday, and bet on the Daily Double. You could also go back twenty years and deposit five dollars in a savings account. Good luck.

Time Traveler's Aid. How may I—The best investment with the least weight allowance? Comic books and baseball cards. You're welcome. Oh, avoid anything with mutants in it, the growth potential trails off quickly.

She'd better have a good excuse.

Time Traveler's Aid—Intimate contact with your ancestors is discouraged, but not illegal. However, in this time period I strongly urge that you protect yourself by autoinoculating with antiviral 17Ca at least one hour before contact. To be safe, I'd repeat twelve hours later. . . . Thank you for the compliment, no I'm busy tonight. Yes, and every night this century.

Time Traveler's Aid, how may I help you? Monotheists are quite sensitive about such matters. I suggest you leave, or else totally change your appearance. Rapidly. Think nothing of it.

Time Traveler's Aid, how may I—Will you hold please? Well, what kept you? The Mongol Horde? Oh, they did? Things have been crazy here too.

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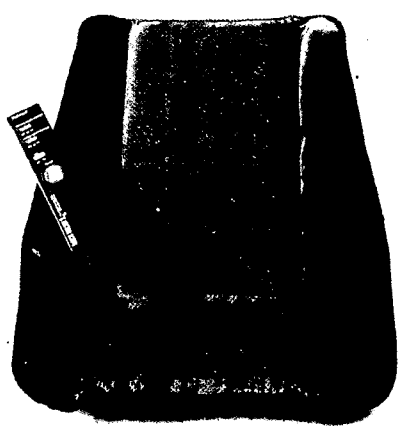

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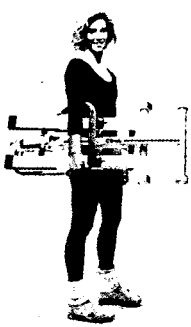

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PRECARNATION

Phillip C. Jennings

Electronic immortality may provide us with an endless number of options for the afterlife, but which one could you live with for all eternity . . . ?

art: Alan M. Clark

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It was a windy spring afternoon on the first Thursday of Barnie's first week of retirement. He borrowed Spence from his sister-in-law and drove the boy to Loose Park to watch the kites.

The two of them gooped up with sunscreen and spread their blanket in the meadow at the south end of the park, where Spence wouldn't notice the pond—and Barnie wouldn't ponder the concrete footings where the playground equipment used to be. *Out of sight and out of mind.* That was wisest, because they hadn't brought bread to feed the ducks, as the kid would want to do. Barnie had decided: ducks were always there, but only on perfect days could you enjoy the spectacle of seven-tailed kites, hunter kites, Disney-character kites, and all the rest.

Spence was awed. He looked at a fox-and-dragon duel, and then at the people who controlled the panoply of the heavens with subtle waves and tugs. A couple of teenagers raced by, trying to loft a huge box-kite up there to join the others.

"What a beautiful day, friend!" someone said, a scrubbed young man with a bright smile. A man out of nowhere.

With his eyes to the skies, Barnie hadn't noticed the stranger's approach. "Uh, yes it is." Who was this guy? An insurance salesman? Kids like Spence drew people sometimes, now that they were rare.

"A beautiful day to talk about Jesus. A day to consider your plans for the hereafter."

"I'm not interested," Barnie said in his *go away* voice. He couldn't imagine being the sort of person who sold religions door to door, or made phone calls that began: "*Are you the homeowner at 5807 Brookside?*" Hucksters were an alien race. Let them bother each other.

"Not interested in your own future? In the Good News of the Bible?"

"I'm not interested," Barnie repeated. He was one generation removed from Old World peasant stock, and his values didn't seem to apply in Kansas City. *Keep to yourself. Be polite. Don't make a fuss.*

By Barnie's own lights he was curt to the point of rudeness, but the man persisted, as they often did. "Friend, death comes to us all. You can't hide your head in the sand and hope God's judgment will pass you by."

Barnie surged with sudden anger. His face colored, and his heart thumped fast. He could only hope Spencer was too distracted to listen. He lowered his voice. "Yes, I'm going to die, in four months. Thanks so very much for reminding me!"

Incredibly, the young man hunkered down, as if these words were an invitation to intimacy. He was slim, round-faced, no taller than they made them in Missouri. When Barnie visited his Minnesota family he felt like a midget, but among Kansas Citians he was on the big side.

They were certainly a mismatch: a boyish hundred-percent American

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in country club togs, versus a patched and rumpled Nordic with a drinker's nose, one finger missing in a carpentry accident. They were management versus labor. Republican versus Democrat. The fellow's smile flickered briefly to show sympathy, and his eyes were bright with the sort of sincerity taught in some true-believer classroom. "What do you suppose happens when you wake up on the other side? Do you get your choices *then?* Or is it *too late?* Your soul is real, friend. It's the realest part of you. And it's your soul that makes these commitments while you still have time, or else it suffers the consequences."

"I can't believe this." Barnie shook his head. "Christ! It's not heaven. You guys talked up heaven for two thousand years, and you sure didn't mean the kind of fun and games we've got now. It's not heaven, it's electronic immortality. It's recycling. Ten years ago all your Rapture crowd was totally against the new setup. *'A hell of fake souls inside a computer!' 'God's image, reduced to zeros and ones!'* "

Barnie found himself using his hands. Alarmed at how this unwanted gospeler had goaded him into a rant, he reached over to scratch Spence's back. "Look at that one! It's got a shiny string!" the kid said.

"Yeah! How do they do that?"

"True. Many of us were," the man said, dragging Barnie back to his own line of patter. "My name's Robbie. Robbie Adams." He knew better than to hold out his hand.

After a pause, he went on. "We didn't understand. God's worked his Plan through history, using the Church, but using Science too. Now we're here, as God promised long ago. Thanks to hormones and nanotechnology and cybernetics, we've reached the Last Days, but the Bible tells us God's warnings still apply: One straight and narrow road to salvation."

"Excuse me." Oblivious to all this theology, Spence toddled toward the hill crest where six or eight kite-flyers stood. Barnie stood, wincing at the pain in his fifty-five-year-old knees, and followed the kid like a distant watchdog.

He decided not to fetch Spence back to the blanket. By wandering away, the boy had rescued him. What a relief! Let that guy—Robbie—stew around for a while, and go off to find another victim.

The people on the hill allowed Spence to tug their kite-strings, and make their creations dip and swoop in the sky. They were nice, the last generation of men and women who would relate to four-year-olds as other than precious freaks. Kids could tell the difference. One of the horror figures in children's literature was the maiden aunt who couldn't accommodate the very young, no matter how loudly she exclaimed and fussed.

Fifty years from now it would be all maiden aunts and uncles, ranging from late teens to middle age, and nobody would be "natural" anymore. Not with kids, nor with the few codgers who chose old age and the

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termination of real death—if that was allowed. Barnie thought about the future as if he wouldn't be there. Of course he wouldn't. He was scheduled to die in four short months—with his liver condition, that was as long as the doctors felt comfortable giving him. But his body would still be alive after renewal, young and healthy and with a regenerated finger, and the soul in that body would be him in a way, though without his lifetime of memories.

Minnesota would get purged from his mind, and that meant Barnie Jacobsen would be someone else afterward. You couldn't renew the human brain without tidying away much of the wiring, the protein arrangements and polarities, that made up the human personality. That was one fact. Another fact: nanocytes weren't site-specific. You couldn't pick and choose . . . renew *this* organ, but not *that* one. The process didn't work well when you tried. It wasn't thorough, and it wasn't wise. A twenty-year-old body made dangerous demands on a seventy-year-old brain, and strokes were common.

So where would the true "Barnie Jacobsen" go? Thanks to the Tri-County Renewal Service, his half century of life experience would be translated into data, with CD-ROM backup. He'd link and load and be allocated processing time within a virtual paradise, but not the sort of afterlife Robbie-boy wanted for him. An eternity of harps and clouds? Singing hymns in robes of white? How boring!

Maybe death would be like Disneyland. You got your ticket to Protestant heaven one day, and went to Islamic paradise the next. Or maybe it would be an elaborate jumble of computer games in which you were a character, hopping through castles and fighting monsters to win some final prize.

Lord, that would get tiresome too!

Barnie wondered why Tri-County had yet to mail him the details of electronic afterlife. Perhaps they hadn't worked things out well. Maybe the dead were unhappy, squirrely, demanding better options.

What if they were? They'd be powerless, like bed cases in rest homes used to be, at the mercy of an overworked staff. Barnie shifted uncomfortably, thinking these thoughts, while Spence told the woman to his left about his toys; HiRezzie the holo-ghost, his stuffed Muffie the Mutant, and his K9 robot.

The woman glanced at Barnie. Her smile said *let him chatter*. They stood on the shores of a river of happy babble, fragments of meaning floating in the flood—it was a treat for adult ears to hear language used so impetuously. Grownups knew it was rare to truly understand what someone else said. Words were cobwebbed up with connotations. Kids ignored all that, and everyone indulged them anyhow.

Part of the bitterness of growing up was that eventually, people were

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no longer willing to accommodate you. But it had to happen, or you'd end as a spoiled brat. In a future of rare children, would parents know how to be easy at first, and gradually tighten their expectations?

Renewees were different. People came out as amnesiacs, but at least they had language. Mostly they remembered how to walk and dress, and often they knew how to use cars and telephones. Thanks to a lifetime accumulation of glial cells, they picked up the three R's in a matter of months. Within a year they could go on to higher education, if they'd left themselves enough inheritance to pay for college.

One of Barnie's duties these next months was to cobble together a book, telling his heir what his resources were, and how he might touch former friends to stretch his money. He'd write a chapter titled *Promises*. Jim Coulton was good for a maintenance job down in the Plaza, working in one of the remaining JC Nichols buildings, and that was convenient, only twenty minutes from Kansas City University.

Barnie stood with Spence for some time before deciding they'd had enough fun in the sun, ozone depletion being what it was. He persuaded the boy. "If we hurry, there's time for an ice cream cone before supper." They went back to pick up their blanket.

Stranger Robbie was gone, but he'd left a tract. Barnie looked for a trash can, but there was nothing between him and the car. He shrugged and stuck the pamphlet in his shirt pocket, not wanting to litter.

After ice cream he dropped the kid at Angie's, and drove home. Denise might pop in before her night shift. Feeling hopeful about his daughter, Barnie left supper in the fridge until she came. He sank into his favorite chair and clicked on Headline News.

Something was missing from this scenario: his whiskey highball, the first in a long evening series. It puzzled his friends that he'd given up drinking *because* all the damage he'd done himself was going to get repaired in four months, but for a long time he'd regarded booze as an oppressor. Knowing that liberty was inevitable helped him achieve it that much sooner.

Maybe his new self would become a souse again. Maybe it was genetic. Barnie shrugged. Thinking of the future, he pulled out Robbie's tract.

Denise came in the back door a few minutes later. Barnie shouted from the living room. "There's something called *Process Fundamentalism*. Know anything about it?"

"Hi, Dad. Should I nuke one of these pies for you?" she answered.

"Yeah. I haven't eaten yet. Chicken. You're welcome to the beef."

She came in to smile at him after setting the timer. "Process Fundamentalism?"

"They're a new kind of Baptist. The purpose of the Church these last two thousand years wasn't only to convert the heathen. It sponsored the

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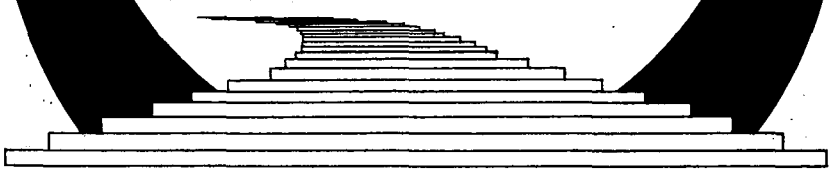

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birth of Western science. Everything science has done was intended by God, see? Even evolution. God created the world six thousand years ago to *look like* it was older, because that stimulated the right sort of scientific work."

Denise turned down the TV's volume. "You need a yard sale. Get rid of some of this junk." Barnie waited. She plucked the pamphlet out of his hands and turned it over. "I guess that makes God a liar. The Perfect Liar! Or else he kicked the job down to Satan. Why would God *create* Satan, except to tell the biggest possible lie!"

The microwave beeped. Barnie followed Denise into the kitchen, and got out the silverware. "Apple cider?" he asked as he opened the fridge.

"Yeah. Dad, you shouldn't be reading this crap. If you want I can go to Tri-County and get their brochures. Or else just wait. You're scheduled, so you should get all sorts of informational mail."

"That's what I've been expecting. Nothing's come yet," Barnie answered in a puzzled tone. "These Process Fundies say they're licensed by Tri-County to provide the best possible afterlife. They want me to plunk for them. It's like choosing a channel on cable TV, except you have to stick with that choice for a long time afterward."

"And why would you want *their* channel?" Denise asked, raising an eyebrow. Barnie looked at her, wondering how he'd gotten a daughter with dark hair, still slim in her late twenties. The Minnesota Jacobsens were overweight blonds. The women married young and expanded at inches-per-year, but then, Denise was single. If she had a sex life, Barnie didn't know about it.

What were they talking about? Oh yeah. "Nobody else cares about the dead. Only these religious freaks. The non-religious heavens are slapdash jobs, with no guiding light for the growth and salvation of the souls in their care. They're like sitcom rerun channels, always going for cheap time-fillers. That's the impression I get from this pamphlet. The Process Fundies are dedicated. They're in it for God, not for profit. They've hired a huge staff of pious software gamers—"

Denise laughed. "Pious software gamers!" she repeated. "Christ!"

After Barnie ate a forkful of supper, he joined in. "Do you think the options are that limited?" he asked. "Will I have to live inside a cable TV universe? Will I be a character in a neverending series of old movies?"

"It's not *you*, Dad. It's just data, copied from your brain. Just memories. Try thinking the other way. The blanked soul in this body of yours—*that's* the real you. People have suffered amnesia before, and the government didn't issue them new Social Security numbers. They didn't get birth certificates every time it happened."

Denise grimaced, and ate a few mouthfuls before she spoke again. "This current generation of nanocytes—they get injected into your body,

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all carrying the same instructions. They invade your cells and rejuvenate each one the same way, trillions of them. They're all mindless duplicates."

"Uh huh." Barnie didn't have the faintest idea what Denise was getting at.

"Well, in the future they'll give you a second injection a few hours after renewal," she went on. "Trillions of new wave nanocytes, but each carries its own *special* instructions. They'll go to the brain, and repair some hunk of memory that we've got backed up on CD-ROM. The idea is, it's possible to reverse the translation from wetware to bits and bytes, switch it back to wetware, and parse out the repair work. In fact it's inevitable. A few decades from now, you'll be able to renew and get your old mind back afterward."

Barnie swallowed a mouthful of chicken pot pie. He waved his fork. "That's great for the new Barnie Jacobsen, the guy who's in my body when it happens. But what about *me?*"

Denise paused. "Your computerized memories will be a resource. You'll tell historians about your turn-of-the-century life—when they bother to turn you on. God knows, Dad. I'm saying they won't keep a thousand virtual heavens going and growing, once technology moves beyond this stage and there aren't any new customers. Maybe that's for the best. You don't *want* an eternity of games, and you won't get it. But each time they slip your CD into an input device, you'll glimpse another future, and somewhere down the road they'll know how to give you a body if you ask for one."

"Hmm." The prospect of a new body ten thousand years from now . . . nobody'd promised that. What was fated to happen to Barnie in four months seemed remote and unreal, despite the certainty, despite the ticking of the clock. On the far side of that unreality was a cloud of choices, vast and tenuous, fading into total abstraction.

"Home," he blurted. "They can give me everything, but they can't give me home."

"We could visit you afterward. Me and Carl and Angie and Spence. They could slow down your processor with multitasking, so you'd cope with us in real time without going nuts."

"Do people do that?" Barnie asked.

Denise looked uncomfortable. "Your counselor should be telling you all this. You'll get someone assigned to you. I'm just a nurse who works the next wing over. Anything I tell you is cafeteria gossip."

"Yeah." Barnie took his empty plate to the sink. "Nobody talks about visits."

"Lots of times it doesn't work out. It's weird for the living to talk to audio-visual devices, and it's a sacrifice for the dead. You have to slow

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down and drop out of virtual reality, and you never get back to the same place. Virtual reality doesn't hold still, not like *real* reality."

Barnie swung around. "I'd turn into one of those computer game addicts? The ones who can't drop their fantasies?" He looked at the clock. "Do you have to go?"

"In five minutes." Denise stood and followed Barnie to his cluttered living room. "Tell me, how would *you* design your heaven? What would it be like?"

Barnie sank into his chair. "I wouldn't know it was heaven. I'd think it was real life, and I was a rookie outfielder for the Royals. I'd have a killer of a season, but it would all come as a happy surprise to me." He grinned. "Maybe right now is a heaven like that. Great things are about to happen. How could I tell? How do I know you aren't a computer-generated figment?"

"I hate to pop your bubble, but you're talking about serial amnesia," Denise answered. "The fact that you're *you* through it all, means you better give priority to your heir in this body, and not to some diddly-squat electronic afterlife inside a Tri-County computer."

Denise shouldered her purse and came up to give Barnie a kiss. "I shouldn't have said that. One of you Barnies—the CD-ROM one—will never forgive me."

"I feel sorrier for him than for the other me;" Barnie answered. "I need to take care of that end of things. I only wish I knew more about it."

She nodded and then she was gone. Barnie heard the back door bang, and upped the volume on his TV set. As he clicked from channel to channel, he wondered about the heavenly equivalent to PBS, and all those shows they imported from Britain.

The one thing afterlife couldn't provide him was *home*. Hadn't he said that? Yet here was the Nostalgia Channel. He had the option of recycled war on Victory. C-Span, VH-1 . . . how about the Sports Channel? Barnie contemplated an updated Valhalla, days on the football field, nights feasting and wenching, Country-&-Western skalds droning in the background. Who'd pay a team of programmers to do something like that? Tri-County was government-funded. They probably had a sparse budget.

Barnie went to bed early. Next morning he got a ton of mail, including tickets from his travel agent for that Alaskan Passage cruise he was treating himself to.

Mrs. Kitt saw him on the porch, sorting through the load—he kept a wastebasket out there for the junk mail. "Did you hear the latest?" she called from her front yard. She tugged her hose to move her sprinkler a few feet, then spoke again. "Mrs. Decaccio? They passed her application. They're gonna let her have a baby."

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The way she talked, Mrs. Decaccio must be some other resident along this stretch of Brookside. Barnie didn't know her. "That's nice," he said.

"*Nice?* I tell you what she did. She got herself on the tribal rolls as a Pawnee. A *Pawnee!* Can you imagine, with a name like that? The government—they let them minorities get away with murder. They give them first dibs on reproductive rights ahead of us white folks, and this is what happens! I wonder how much she had to bribe the tribe."

"Hey Ma! Where'd you hide the beer?" One of Mrs. Kitt's boys bellied up to the screen door, inches of paunch showing below his T-shirt.

"It's in the basement fridge," she told him. She turned back to Barnie and shook her head. "It's lucky I had my two kids before all these new rules. Except what's *their* chances of having kids? I'll be dead before I see any grandchildren."

Barnie was reluctant to say *me too.* Mrs. Kitt would take it for sympathy, and he didn't much like her. Whenever they talked she snuck in some bit of bigotry, leaving him without the facts to defend her victims. Maybe she was right, and the Pawnees took bribes to enroll fake members. Or maybe Mrs. Decaccio really *was* part Pawnee.

Mrs. Kitt was as old as he was, maybe older. Barnie's abused liver was crapping out, but she might have six or seven years left before the doctors scheduled her renewal and those two slob sons were left on their own. He'd have to tell his new self about them, in case he chose to live in this house, because there was no love lost, and it was bad news that the younger one was back home from wherever. It meant Barnie would have to keep his doors locked. It meant loud music and shouting matches with his mother, and acts of petty vandalism while Barnie was gone on his cruise.

Barnie cleared his throat, a noise Mrs. Kitt could take for sympathy if she wanted. With a farewell nod he turned back into his house. There was stuff here from Tri-County, and he wanted to read it.

He found what he wanted under *Other Options.* He dialed the number to set up an appointment with his counselor, and hunted through the phone book for a local listing under *Max Toys.* They had an office in Johnson County, way out on Metcalf. Barnie nerved himself, and called. "*I'll pencil you in tomorrow afternoon,*" the man said. He had an East Coast accent, and an East Coast name: Sam Lensky. "*Nah, don't worry about it. You're close to the wire, right? I don't like putting you guys off if I can help it. Your time's too important.*"

Barnie couldn't figure Sam out, not at this distance. Was he another huckster? He spoke rapid-fire, a busy, important man, but by the time Barnie rang off Sam had spent five minutes—five potentially useless minutes—chatting up a "client" who might not work out at all. "I mean,

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I'm just not in the same league with Whoopi Goldberg," Barnie muttered to himself. "Damn it!"

Sam said that Whoopi had arranged to distribute her various selves among ten thousand Max Toy incarnations. It was the sort of extravagantly odd afterlife Barnie might have expected of her. "*Jokes, accents, punch phrases, mannerisms—we license them out,*" Sam had gone on. "*Plus there's a load of public domain stuff.*" Barnie shook his head. What was he getting into here?

He went on cursing in diminuendo. "Dammit dammit dammit." He moved to his desk and began to organize. It took ten minutes to clear the junk so he could start writing. "*Promises,*" he began, and scribbled down a row of friends' names and what they were good for. "I've always thought I had the brains for college, but it was too late for me. After my hitch in the Navy I wasn't able to take other people's crap anymore. You won't have that problem."

He stopped. *Maybe I won't take orders from myself. Maybe I'll rebel. I've got to stop being bossy.*

It was noon. He went to the kitchen and found he was low on milk and bread. Low on everything. Time to get some groceries.

Barnie's garage was a basement tuck-under, with a steep rise to the street. He had to gun the car upslope and stop at the crest to check for side traffic, revving the engine to keep it alive. He'd mastered the trick, which got harder as his Ford grew old and cranky. Today was a repeat, except the car stalled *after* he made the turn onto Brookside. The truck bearing down from the left—the one that was coming too fast—failed to brake until much too late.

The crash was a slow-motion carnival ride. The world whirled and a tree loomed from nowhere. The silence afterward was strange, a tick in time. Mrs. Kitt's fat son came lumbering down from his porch. He tugged at Barnie's crumpled door. "Hey, are you all right? Are you all right?"

"Ah . . . oh. I'm squeezed. I can't move. Oh God!"

"I'll call for help." He ran back to his house, his butt half out of his pants. Barnie tasted blood in his mouth. It hurt to cough. He felt faint. Shocked. Dizzy.

Someone else came to his window. Barnie couldn't make out what he said, and couldn't answer. A long time passed. He seemed to be lying on his back. Another long time. Tubes.

He woke to see Denise at his side. "You're at St. Luke's, Dad. They're going to renew you. Your liver is hemorrhaging. It's the only way."

Barnie moved his lips, and Denise bent closer. "I left . . . notes . . . on my desk."

"Good. I'll find them." She took his hand and clutched it, not letting go.

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"Tickets. Alaskan cruise. Treat yourself."

Denise shook her head. "I can get money back on them. You'll need it."

Sam Lensky stepped forward into view. "You've got to buy a lot of computer if you're going to be a Max Toys product. You've got to buy a 686."

"Ah." Barnie took a slow breath. "Sam."

"I heard about your accident. It was on the radio," Lensky explained. "I told the hospital people about our talk this morning."

And so you came to save my future? Incredible! "All those clients you bragged up. Teachers. Clowns. Entertainers. I'm nothing." He summoned another breath. "Just a carpenter."

"You're a good dad," Denise said. "I'll vouch for you."

A drunk, Barnie thought to himself, but he kept his mouth shut. 686 computers didn't have drinking problems.

Next weekend Carl and Angie "borrowed" HiRezzie the holo-ghost away from Spence. It took a while to install the new equipment in his old wall-slot, and connect the speakers and hologram projectors. Angie took her son to Loose Park to feed the ducks, and when they were gone Carl switched Barnie on.

He glowed from the center of Spence's bedroom, a Baron Munchausen figure. "How's this? I've got other options."

"You don't think you're too scary?" the kid's father asked. "I mean, Captain Hook clothes and all."

"How about this?"

They shopped through an inventory: Old King Cole, Tic-Toc of Oz, Buster Brown, Weird Al Yankovic. . . . "You don't have *yourself* in there somewhere, do you?" Carl asked.

"Hah. Your meddlesome older brother, moving in for all eternity! No, when Spence gets too old for me, I want you to sell me cheap. I'll keep some other kid company. Parenting won't be easy in the future, when there aren't a lot of examples, and not much social support. All the stuff kids used to have; schools and playgrounds and their own culture—well, maybe I can help. I hope so."

Carl sighed. "I wouldn't have agreed to this if you'd asked me beforehand. That accident saved you. What could I say when you were on your deathbed? My own brother!" He grimaced. "Don't get in my way, okay? Don't ever get between me and Spence."

"I wouldn't be doing my job if I did," Barnie answered happily. He revisualized as Uncle Scrooge McDuck. "I dinna think so. I'm not going to muck up my Happily Ever After."

They heard footsteps. The front door slammed. Carl stepped back into

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the hallway. Angie prodded her son upstairs, and a long half-minute later Spence edged into his bedroom.

"Hullo," Barnie the Poo said shyly.

Spence looked doubtful. "Hullo." His face transformed. "You want to see my trains?"

"Real trains?" Barnie asked.

"Toot! Too-oot!" Spence sang out. He ran across and raised the window seat. Toys lay piled inside. Together they began to take inventory. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Terry Bisson** returns to these pages next month with our September cover story. Bisson's famous tale "Bears Discover Fire," which appeared here in 1990, proved to be one of the most popular stories we've ever published, and the only story so far ever to win the Hugo, the Nebula, the Theodore Sturgeon Award, and our own Readers' Award poll all in the same year. Next month, he takes us to the Moon for a First Contact story—but, as is to be expected, in Bisson's hands this familiar territory is full of unexpected twists and surprises, wry, funny, poignant, gently wistful, and quietly profound, as a somewhat reluctant astronaut struggles to learn what "The Shadow Knows." We think you'll like this one.

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER: Critically acclaimed British author **Brian Stableford** gives us a moving and poignant look at "The Facts of Life"; Hugo and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** makes us privy to the secrets of her Bed of Pain (she recently underwent corrective surgery for a back injury) as she relates the wry story of a "Close Encounter" that is definitely not part of the usual hospital regimen; new writer **Kathleen Ann Goonan** takes us to a troubled future Hawaii still haunted by the ghosts of the past, in more ways than one, in a compelling and powerful novella called "Kamehameha's Bones"; new writer **Jamil Nasir** returns to offer us a fast-paced and suspenseful tale of intrigue and the politics of power in a callous high-tech future, in "The Dakna"; Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** takes a sly look at Cosmology and its consequences, in "Give Us This Day"; and new writer **Holly Wade,** making her *Asimov's* debut, gives us a bittersweet and evocative glimpse of "The Cool Place." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstands on July 20, 1993, or subscribe now and be sure to miss none of our great upcoming issues.

COMING SOON: big new novellas by **Michael Swanwick, R. Garcia y Robertson, Avram Davidson,** and **Valerie E. Freireich,** plus powerful new stories by **Ian MacLeod, Neal Barrett, Jr., Mary Rosenblum, Geoffrey A. Landis, Esther M. Friesner, David Redd, William Tenn, Phillip C. Jennings, Tom Purdom,** and many others.

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CURSE OF THE ANGEL'S WIFE

The milk silken embrace
of his six-foot wingspan
drapes her in a coverlet
of staid domestic desire.
The loose feathers she must
vacuum on a daily basis

drive her up the wall.
He is perfect to be sure.
Just like their marriage.
Just like their lives.
A spacious townhouse
in an affluent suburb

of the Celestial City.
Two and a half children.
Summer vacations in Jamaica.
Thanksgiving with her parents
in Denver or his in Rochester.
Christmas at God's doorstep

with the Hallelujah Chorus.
Only there are no Roman candles.
No dicey dives into the ink blue
waters of some icy Adriatic
while the stars shine on.
What should be the limitless

reaches of Heaven have become
for her a precise Purgatory.
And as she moves incessantly
from one color-coordinated room
to the next, upstairs and down,
she knows it will always be such.

Always she will welcome him home.
Always she will be a mother of two
pregnant with this barely half a child.
"Hallelujah!" they will shout and they
will sing until their lungs are bursting.
Loose feathers blowing everywhere.

—Bruce Boston

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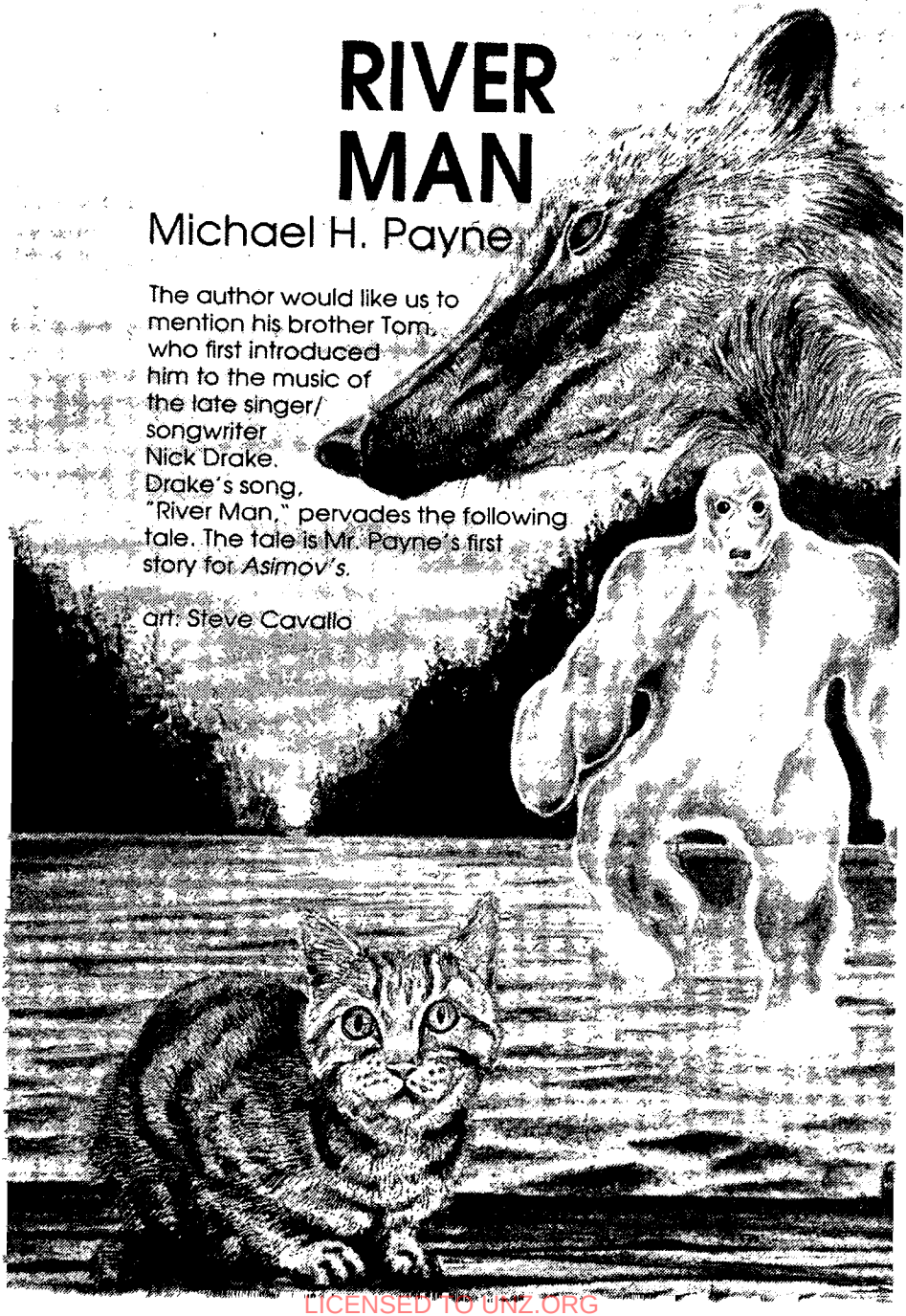
RIVER MAN

Michael H. Payne

The author would like us to mention his brother Tom, who first introduced him to the music of the late singer/songwriter Nick Drake. Drake's song, "River Man," pervades the following tale. The tale is Mr. Payne's first story for *Asimov's*.

art: Steve Cavallo



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The platform at Kahnbir Station had seen one flood too many; Clem shifted on the warped bench until he found a hollow and settled back with a sigh. At least with spring on the way, the rains would start slacking off and traffic along the river could get back to normal.

Today the Talia flowed quiet and gentle enough along the dock below the platform. The jungle on either side of the river shimmered as the wind washed past, the sun dancing through the billows above and crackling warm through Clem's fur, the clouds' shadows brushing over the station and shivering wonderfully down his tail.

He closed his eyes then and thought about the Ocean. So many coatis had moved to the cities along the coast that Clem saw more and more of that great, rolling expanse with every trip downriver. The salt scent of it, its crashing waves, the sheer *size* of the thing made the spins and splashes of the Talia seem so small; Clem could understand folks wanting to move down there. With another sigh, he curled up on the bench and set his ears to catch the whistle and chug of Old Ephram's barge, his eventual ride upriver.

But instead of the whistle, voices woke him from his doze: two voices, neither one coati, arguing under the river's rush and the jungle's rustle. Clem rolled to look back down the trail. The high, mewling voice was probably a cat's, but the other . . . the other had a lilt to it Clem didn't recognize.

"Oh, sure," this second voice was saying. "Like I *wanted* to be here in the first place! Like any of this is *real!*"

"Whine, whine, whine," the cat replied. "Was it *me* that demanded we come to this stinking jungle? I don't think so. Y'know, I just might be starting to have second thoughts about leading you around like this."

"Might be?! You've had it in for me from the beginning, Gherk; admit it!"

"Yeah, right; I *enjoy* getting my fur pulled out saving folks I hate from boxhounds. Get a brain, Betty."

"And don't call me that! My name's Elizabeth!"

"Then don't call me Gherk!"

"Well, what kind of name is 'Gherkin'?"

"Gherkin is an ancient and respectable feline monicker, Betty, and furthermore—"

At this point, the two rounded the corner of the trail below Kahnbir Station, and Clem sat up and stared. One was a cat, all right, a tabby gliderumbler like the kind who danced the stars between every earth from the Deep Past to the Far Future. But the *other*—the other had to be a human. Nothing else Clem had ever heard of looked like *that*: upright like a bear; furless as a lizard but with a terrga's bushy topknot;

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smooth as a dolphin but colored more like a fish; thin arms and legs wrapped in layers of cloth.

The argument continued as they stomped up to the station platform, the cat's tail lashing the air as she said, "I am *doing* this, I'll have you know, out of the goodness of my heart! I leave you alone for even two minutes, and, wham! you're gremlin food, you got that?"

"Oh, please! *Who* was it pulled your tail out of that boxhound's claws on our way here, huh?! Who was it—"

"Hey, who's the professional gliderumbler here?" The cat bent back and licked at her tail. "You humans are a hazard to navigation, pure and simple. You've got no head for reality!"

The human stopped on the top step of the platform and stared down at the cat. "Reality? *Reality?!* Excuse *me,* Gherk, but reality has very little to *do* with talking animals and robots and jumping through space from planet to planet! Reality is an alarm clock buzzing at 6:15 every morning so you can maybe get something to eat before catching the bus to school for an extra hour of physics so you can maybe pass the AP test, maybe get into a decent college, and maybe get the classes you need so you can maybe get a job that pays more than minimum wage and *maybe* make a living for yourself!"

She swept an arm over the jungle, the river, the station and Clem himself. "All *this* is nothing but some twisted fever dream, and I absolutely *refuse* to spend the rest of my life wandering around in it!" The human spun and shouted back down the trail: "Do you hear me?! You're nothing but a pack of cards! Nothing!"

When the human wheeled back, her teeth gritted and her fists clenched, the cat only yawned. "Finished?" she asked.

The human looked like she was about to kick the cat into the river, but with a shudder, the being seemed to deflate. Back onto a bench she dropped and wiped a naked paw over her forehead. "Just . . . just leave me alone. . . "

"Sure thing." The cat came over to the edge of the platform, looked up and down the river, then turned and nodded to Clem. "Howdy, cousin. Any idea when the next barge upriver's coming through?"

Clem had to laugh at that. "Upriver? Cousin, no one but me is stupid enough to ride *up*river this time of year, and I only do it 'cause it's my job." He stuck out his paw. "I'm Clemyento Paracas, but, please, call me Clem."

The cat brushed a paw against Clem's. "I'm Gherkin, and that," she jerked her head toward the human, "that's the remains of Betty Kaufitz."

"*Elizabeth,*" the human groaned, slumped down on the bench, one arm across her eyes. "The name's Elizabeth."

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"Whatever." Gherkin flashed Clem a grin. "Is there a barge coming or isn't there?"

"Maybe." Clem squinted at the sun, which was hopping in and out of clouds. "The Ephrams usually get here about midday when they come at all. Another month or so, they'll come through twice a week, but during the rainy season . . . " he spread his paws.

Gherkin's grin curled at her whiskers again. "Hey, Betty, you hear that? We might just be here a spell."

"Wonderful," came the other's cracking voice.

Clem looked over at her and cleared his throat. "Excuse me, cousin Elizabeth, but are you truly a *human?"*

She raised her arm and glared across the benches at him. "Yes, I am truly a human. And if your *next* comment is going to be: 'Well, it certainly is unusual to see a human out along the gliderumbles,' do me a favor and don't say it. That's all I've heard for the past however many weeks it's been, and it's getting a little old." Her pointed, mostly white eyes blinked at him. "So, what are *you?* A raccoon?"

"A coatimundi, actually." Clem smiled. "I'm sorry if I offended. It's just that we've only had two human visitors in the recorded history of the Talia valley. I wouldn't know how rare humans are along the gliderumbles, though; I don't get away from the river much in my line of work."

The cat cocked her head. "Why? What do you do?"

Clem brushed at his whiskers. "I'm the local griot."

Both the cat and the human gave him blank looks.

"Forgive me; I forget you're from different earths. I'm, well, a *newspaper*, I guess is the word. I go up and down the Talia, from the settlements in the snow country all the way to Ballavwa along the coast, and tell folks what's going on." He shrugged. "It keeps me pretty busy."

Gherkin slapped a paw against the bench. "Hey, hey! Betty, is this luck or *what?"*

Elizabeth had sat up suddenly, the bench creaking beneath her. "The River Man," she said, her eyes wide. "Do you know where we can find the River Man?"

"The River Man?" Clem could only stare for a moment. "How do you know about the River Man?"

The cat shrugged. "Those robots up in the Far Future have just about everything stored *some*where, and they'll tell you all about it, whether you want 'em to or not."

"But . . . but . . . " Clem looked from one to the other. "Why the River Man?"

"He's got to get me back." Elizabeth moved across the platform to the bench behind Clem's. "The robots said that if you find him, he grants

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you one wish, no matter how impossible. He's my only chance to get home."

Clem shook his head quickly. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Can't Gherkin take you back to your earth?"

The cat gave a snort. "I *could* if I'd brought her up from her earth in the *first* place. But Betty went and did it the hard way."

"The hard way?"

Elizabeth pulled at her yellow topknot. "Yeah. I did it myself."

Clem stared some more. "But . . . but that's impossible! Only *cats* can gliderumble!"

The human grimaced. "So everyone keeps telling me."

"But how? How could you possibly—"

"I don't *know!*" Elizabeth waved her arms. "I was just running for the bus! It was already at the stop, and it belched diesel smoke all over me as I slid around the corner; I sneezed, lost my balance, and fell. The smoke was everywhere, and I . . . I didn't hit the sidewalk. I just kept *falling.*" She blew out a breath. "Like it really matters: I'm probably lying unconscious in the gutter at Fifth and Carey right now *anyway.*"

"Yeah, Betty's bollixed up big time." Gherkin scratched an ear. "She doesn't know *how* she gliderumbles, so she can't steer her own way back, and none of us cats can trace it 'cause none of us brought her *up.* The robots looked her over and said she's from a human earth around 1990 A.D., so that cut us down to, oh, only about 40,000 earths. I was all ready to start investigating, but then they went and told her about this River Man, and here we are."

"But . . . you can't . . . " Clem turned back to Elizabeth. "You must know which earth you came from!"

She spit out a laugh. "Yeah. The *real* one."

"No, I mean which of the—"

"Save it, cousin." Gherkin tapped her tail against Clem's side. "Our Betty's convinced herself that this's all some sort of *nightmare,* see, and not even getting herself nearly torn apart by boxhounds has changed her mind."

Clem blinked at the human, but before he could say anything, a whistle sounded from downriver, and the *Timiros* chugged into view, boxes lashed in stacks over the deck and along the gunwales. Clem could see Young Ephram at the bow, and the rat waved as the barge came up to the station; Old Ephram stood hunched over in the pilot house, one paw on the throttle and the other on the wheel. Young Ephram leaped onto the dock, made fast the bowline, and scurried to seize the stern; Old Ephram's paws moved, and the rumble of the engine died away, the barge drifting with a thunk into the pilings.

As Young Ephram secured the stern cable, Old Ephram stuck his head

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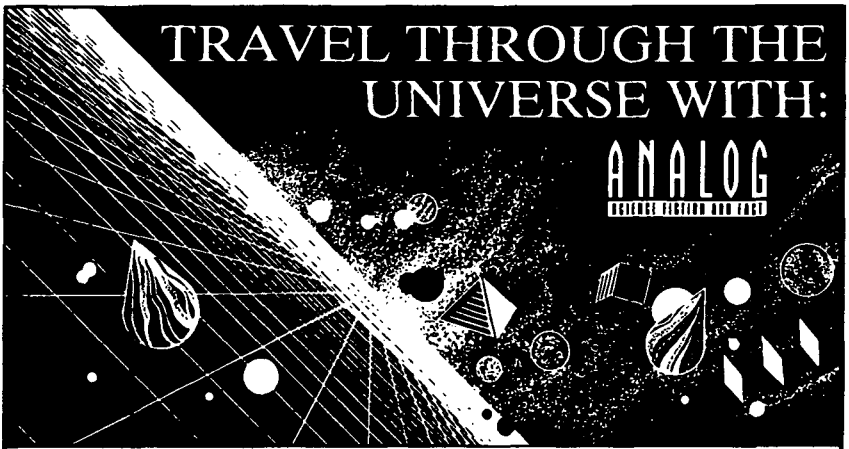

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out the pilot house window. "Ho there, griot!" the rat called, his good eye glinting darkly. "What news?"

"Good, bad, and indifferent," Clem called back as always, and Old Ephram pounded the side of the pilot house, laughter wheezing out of him, as always. "You're early, Ephram."

"It's the weather." Old Ephram nodded to the younger rat. "Tell 'im, boy; I'll start unlashing the cargo."

Young Ephram came up the dock ramp to the station platform. "We got the news on the delta, griot: monster storm heading in. Ballavwa and the coastal cities're looking at six inches of rain, but it'll be worse when it slams into these mountains. The old man and me, we're off-loading half the cargo here to get to Bentito before the storm hits." He suddenly noticed the others on the platform and gave a slight bow. "Good day, gliderumbler and . . . and companion. Excuse me, but I'd better help the old man. We've only got a few hours." He headed back down to where Old Ephram was tossing cords loose from the crates.

Clem rubbed his whiskers. "The last storm of the season is always the worst." He turned to the others. "This isn't a good time to be running around looking for myths, I'm afraid. I hate to tell you, but I've been on this river my whole life, and I've never seen any River Man. Every once in a while someone comes up with a new story, and I pass it along, but if you want my opinion, he's mostly just a legend."

Elizabeth blew out a breath. "Oh great! Even my hallucinations have hallucinations!"

"Will you stop?" Gherkin gave her a look. "If anyone's a hallucination around here, Betty, I'd hafta say it was *you*."

"Don't call me Betty!"

"Oh, did the bad hallucination hurt Betty's feelings?"

They started in again, so Clem went down the dock ramp to help the Ephrams get their cargo unloaded. Old Ephram had keys to the shed on the station platform, and Clem and Young Ephram hefted the boxes the old rat pointed to, staggered up the ramp, and stacked them inside. After a while, Elizabeth left off arguing with Gherkin and pitched in; she was taller than either Clem or Young Ephram and could carry more, so the work went faster and soon was done.

Clem dropped onto the bench next to the sleeping cat as Elizabeth came out of the storeroom and wiped her forehead. She jerked a thumb at the shed. "Is this going to be all right? How heavily does the river flood?"

"Pretty heavily," Clem replied, "but it hasn't knocked the station over yet."

Young Ephram was fastening the locks on the door. "It's the best shed along the Talia, so don't worry." He turned as he slipped the keys into

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his vest pocket. "Thanks for your help, cousins, but we'd best be on our way."

Elizabeth was getting her jacket from the bench where she'd laid it down. Clem watched her, then asked, "Well, cousin Elizabeth, what have you decided?"

"I want *out* of here," she said. "And if that means we go looking for some mythical creature, then that's what we do."

Clem had to smile. "Then you believe we're real? That you really *are* in a place you have to get out of?"

"No." She brushed her hair from her forehead. "But when in a delusion, you have to play by its rules: I saw that on T.V. once. This is all just parts of my brain pushing each other around, so whatever solution comes out, that's the one I have to take. When in Rome—"

"I've been to Rome," Gherkin interrupted, still curled up on the bench. "Catullus, Cicero, the Caesars: they were all bums." The cat unrolled and stretched. "We going or what?"

The barge whistle blasted as the engines ground to life. Gherkin leaped down the dock ramp; Clem gestured for Elizabeth to go ahead, and they were quickly on board. The clouds had darkened as they worked, thickened, and spread over the whole sky. Young Ephram tossed off the dock lines and clambered onto the barge; Old Ephram gave the whistle another pull, and Kahnbir Station drifted away, slowly shrinking behind them.

Clem led the others into the cabin below the pilot house. Nothing had changed except for the table in the middle of the room: instead of the tiny, splintered thing Clem had sat at so often, a huge, carved oak dining table now filled the cabin, just enough room left for the six chairs around it and the four bunks fastened to the walls.

Young Ephram came in right behind them, and Clem had to ask, "What is this thing? How did you get it in here?"

The rat laughed and crooked a claw at the stairs on the starboard side of the cabin. "The old man saw it in the bazaar at Ballavwa and had to have it; you know how he gets. Took me and three stevedores four hours, pulling it apart, undoing the legs, nearly prying the cabin door off. . . ." He shook his head as he lit the lanterns against the darkness coming in at the portholes.

Clem nodded. "Sorry I missed it." He pulled out a chair and squeezed in. "Make yourselves comfortable, cousins." He waved a paw at the two still standing, then at the two doors in the opposite wall. "The head's on the left, the galley on the right, and don't go topside while Old Ephram's driving." He looked at the rat. "Did I forget anything?"

"The ladder by the stairs leads down to the engine room," Young Ephram said, "so don't use it. But other than that, enjoy your trip. I'd

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better go and check on the old man." He gave them a bow and scurried up the stairs.

Gherkin had jumped onto the table and was wandering around, sniffing at various black and brown spots. "Simply charming joint they got here."

Elizabeth was staring at the stairs as she sat down. "Why does he say 'the old man'? He's not a man; he's a *rat*."

Clem blinked at her, but the cat said, "Do folks often comment on your thickness, Betty? Language works different when you gliderumble; that's why you can understand him at all, remember? I already explained this."

"Explained? Gherk, all you keep saying is 'language works different.' That's not an explanation! It's not even grammatical!"

"So now you've got a problem with the way I talk?"

"I've got a problem with you talking at *all!* But I guess I shouldn't be surprised when a dumb animal doesn't know an adjective from an adverb!"

Gherkin shook her head and licked a front paw. "You need a serious attitude adjustment, Betty, my girl."

"No, I just need to get *out* of here!" Elizabeth dropped her chin onto her folded arms. "Out of this madhouse and back to where things make *sense!*"

"Sense? I heard you describing your earth to the seer robots, and it didn't sound any more sensible than any other earth. But, as a dumb animal, maybe I don't get the subtle nuances of the whole thing."

Elizabeth glared at the cat, and a silence fell over the room. Well, almost a silence: the wind whistled outside the portholes, and Clem could hear raindrops spattering against the sides of the cabin, thunder rolling beneath it all. Even under the best of conditions, it took forty minutes to get from Kahnbir to Bentito, and if the edge of the storm was on them already . . . he cleared his throat. "I don't know much about gliderumbling, but it might be safer for you two to pop out of here before the storm hits. I don't think we're going to make Bentito, and riding out a storm on the river isn't a thing to do if you don't have to."

The cat gave a snort. "Yeah, you don't know much about gliderumbling. We don't 'pop,' cousin. We dance through the spaces between space. And anyway, we can't do it from just *anywhere*. Each earth has specific jumping on and jumping off points, and this ain't one of 'em."

"I see." Clem rubbed at his whiskers. "Then we'd better get some life vests." He inched around the table to the foot locker under one of the bunks.

Elizabeth's furless skin had grown paler. "You . . . you think it's going to be that bad?"

"It's never much fun."

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Gherkin yawned and stretched. "I'm sorry, but after dealing with boxhounds and gremlins, I can't get too excited about anything earthly." Her ears twitched back as thunder boomed outside; with a rush of wind, the pattering on the cabin walls became a pounding, and the barge swayed slightly under paw. "Of course," the cat added, "all this noise *could* sure make a person cranky."

Clem had gotten the locker open, and he pulled three orange vests out, tossing the largest to Elizabeth and the smallest onto the table next to the cat. She sniffed at it, rolled her eyes, and turned to where Elizabeth was unfastening the straps with shaking hands. Gherkin gave a little laugh. "What? Afraid of an imaginary storm, Betty?"

The human was slipping the life jacket over her head. "Shut up, Gherk. I'm just playing the game my brain set up."

"Yeah, sure. Keep telling yourself that."

Something scuffled at the stairs, and Young Ephram slid into the cabin. "Looks like she's starting a little early. The old man's decided to tie up along the bank; this river gets moving, swells up and washes us downstream, we're liable to end up smashed against some baobab back in the jungle. Stay inside, cousins; it's gonna get bumpy." As he talked, he grabbed a yellow slicker off the floor, slapped a hat over his ears, and pushed the door open. Rain lashed in, lightning arcing from the clouds outside, then the door banged shut.

Clem sat and listened to the rats shouting through the storm at one another, the boat rocking back and forth. Then the rumble of the engines below dropped away, leaving only the rush of rain and wind around the cabin. After a moment, the door burst open, and Young Ephram skidded in, water pouring from his slicker. "Fwoo! Now that's a storm!"

"*Really?*" Gherkin's voice was the driest thing in the room. "I never would've guessed!"

Young Ephram just grinned. "Cargo's nice and tight, and I've got us moored to a good stand along the bank. The river shouldn't rise more'n a few feet, so just sit tight and we'll ride it out." He stuffed the dripping hat into his pocket. "I'll be up in the pilot house; if you need anything, well, Clem, you probably know where it is as well as I do, but yell if you need to." And he scrambled up the stairs.

"Terrific," the cat growled, then rolled upright to face Elizabeth. "Having a good time?"

The boat was really swaying now, and the human looked positively green. "I hate boats. My dad forces us up to the lake every summer, and I always end up sicker than a dog." She closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair.

"Don't think about it," Clem said. "Think about going home. That should cheer you up."

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Gherkin growled again. "It'll sure cheer *me* up!"

They sat for a while listening to the river, the rain, and the wind all trying to get inside the cabin. Then Clem began to hear something else, something that cracked and tumbled in the distance. And he remembered the other danger of being on the river during one of these storms.

"Flash flood," he said aloud.

The others turned to look at him, and someone said, "What?" Then the rumbling and crashing roared against them, and the portside portholes exploded. The cabin wall buckled and burst, mud, rocks, and branches flooding in, and the whole barge pitched on its side. Clem tried to leap up, but the table caught at his chair, and he went tumbling with it down the slope, through the hole in the wall, and into the river.

The current grabbed at him, tried to spin him under and down; Clem dug his claws into the tabletop and hung on. The river thrashed like a speared alligator, knocking the table upside down, and water closed around Clem's fur. He gripped the table tighter, forced his paws to move, clawed and dragged himself to the table's edge, and clambered over. Something wet and warm grabbed him, and he heard Elizabeth's voice over the wind and rain: "Clem! Clem! Are you all right?!"

He gasped and managed to nod. He was jostled sideways, and then the rain wasn't slapping at him nearly so hard. He got his breath back and scraped at the mud in his eyes.

Lightning slashed through the clouds, and Clem saw the river churning by beneath him. The table floated in it, its legs sticking up and tangled in the branches of a banyan tree. Elizabeth was perched on the limb next to him, water dripping from her yellow topknot. The barge was nowhere in sight, rain like a gray curtain thundering down around him. The human's furless paws gripped him tight as she shouted, "What happened?! Where's Gherkin?! Where's the boat?!"

"A flash flood!" Clem yelled back. "They cut straight through the jungle from the mountains, all rock and mud! I—" He cut off as something big and square tumbled into them; the branch jolted and pitched, and the table tore away, spinning downriver, knocked free by what Clem now saw was one of the barge's crates. Elizabeth had managed to grab hold of the branch, and Clem noticed he had dug his claws into the fabric over her leg; he didn't see any blood as he pulled them loose and slipped off her. "Sorry!" he called.

She didn't seem to notice. "Did you see Gherkin?!"

"I didn't see anything! We'll have to hold tight till the rain lets up, then try to get back upriver and see what happened to the boat!"

The rain seemed to be slacking off even as he spoke; the howling in the leaves overhead had dropped to a clattering, and the darkness of just a moment before was lifting, the clouds downriver breaking up. Clem

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stared through the branches. He'd never seen a storm come and go so quickly.

"Look!" The branch shook as Elizabeth clambered to her feet. She was pointing upriver to a bundle of gray fluff washing down in the flow. "Gherkin! We're over here!"

The bundle tumbled slightly as it washed closer but otherwise didn't move; Clem hung on as Elizabeth jumped over him to the end of the branch. Clinging to the limb with one arm, she lowered herself to the river's surface, scooped up the ball of fluff as it swept by, then swung back to a sitting position with the sopping thing in her lap.

It was the tabby, all right, soaked through and unmoving. Elizabeth put a shaking finger to the gliderumbler's throat.

The head rolled all wrong at her touch, twisting too far sideways with no resistance at all. Elizabeth snapped back as if stung and stared at the bundle across her legs. "No," she whispered at last, Clem just able to make it out above the roar of the river. "Oh, Gherkin, *no* . . . "

Clem slid closer along the branch. "She . . . she must've been caught as the table went over." He set a paw on Elizabeth's knee. "I'm sorry, cousin."

"No," Elizabeth said again, her eyes fixed on Gherkin's unbreathing form. "No, it . . . this isn't supposed to happen! She, I mean, this's all . . . all a *dream*. . . ." She poked gently at Gherkin's side, and the cat still did not move. Sunlight wrinkled through the leaves, patterns of shadow sparking over her as Elizabeth put her furless paws to her eyes.

Sunlight? Clem looked up. The clouds had broken into fleecy mountains, towering into the crystal blue above. The wind had fallen, and silence draped the banyan like a blanket. Clem realized that he could hear nothing but Elizabeth sobbing; even the river had stopped roaring beneath them.

But how could that be? Clem looked down at the river—and Something looked back at him, Something that rose and flexed up from the river's surface, Something with water for paws and fur, two dark stones for eyes in the liquid of its head. It flowed glinting out of the river, stood with watery legs settled firm on the shimmering surface, and reared up next to the branch. "Just a dream," it said, its voice like mist. "Just a dream, and yet you grieve."

Elizabeth's head snapped up, her eyes red. "Shut up! Just—" Then she saw the thing, and her voice vanished.

It was Clem who managed to speak first. "River Man," he choked out.

The thing turned to him, its stony eyes shining. "Griot. I enjoy your stories." Then, to Elizabeth: "But you. You confuse me. How can you cry like this?"

Elizabeth wiped her eyes. "She was my friend."

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"Imaginary friends? Aren't you a little old for that?"

A flash of anger touched the human's face. "Shut up! She was more of a friend than most of the people I know!"

"Was she?"

"Yes!" Elizabeth lowered her head. "Yes, she was. Now just . . . just go away. . . ."

Clem stared at her, then tried to open his mouth, to explain that she was distraught, that she didn't know what she was saying. But the River Man waved a watery paw, and Clem found that he couldn't speak. He could only sit and watch as Elizabeth covered her eyes again.

"Go away?" the River Man asked, crossing his arms. "But you came looking for me. You want to go home, don't you?"

She looked up. "*Can* you? I mean, *really?*"

"I don't see why not."

"But . . . " her eyes went to the body in her lap. "What about . . . what about *her?*"

"Well, you can't take her with you." The River Man rubbed his snout. "I can swallow her body, if you like."

"No!" Elizabeth jerked back and almost fell off the branch. "No, I mean, can't you . . . can't you. . . ."

"Bring her back?" He spread his paws. "I'm sorry, but only one impossibility per customer."

Elizabeth looked down at the body, then snapped her eyes over to Clem. "Clem! You could ask him!" She turned to the River Man. "Couldn't he—"

"That's not his wish." A smile touched the River Man's trickling whiskers. "I already know the griot's wish, and, anyway, it's not his time to ask." He leveled a claw sharp as an icicle. "It's *your* time to ask, human, your time to decide." He crossed his arms again and stood, an impossible flex of river water, his stony eyes fixed on Elizabeth.

She stared back, and the unnatural silence stretched long over Clem's ears. She looked for a while at Gherkin's body, starting to stiffen, water drizzling from the mouth and soaking into the fabric around her legs, then she looked up at the sky. At last, closing her eyes, she whispered, "I can't. I wish I could, but I can't." She opened her eyes slowly to the River Man. "Bring her back. Please bring her back."

The River Man spread his liquid arms and began to melt back down toward the river's surface. Clem felt the bonds loosen around his snout, and was about to shout after the figure when Gherkin coughed and rolled over in Elizabeth's lap. Elizabeth gave a little cry, and, with a flash of lightning and a blast of thunder, the clouds crashed back overhead, the river again roaring beneath the banyan tree. The sudden cold lashed into Clem, the rain against the leaves sounding as loud as the waterfalls far up river.

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"You're alive!" Elizabeth shouted; she grabbed the cat and hugged her to her chest. "You're *alive!*"

Gherkin coughed and spat, struggling in the human's arms. "I won't be for long! Ease up, simian!" Elizabeth let her go, and the cat slid back into the human's lap. "Brains and eggs! What hit me?"

Clem couldn't stop staring at the river, the river he had grown up beside, had spent his whole life traveling along; a sharp poke at his side brought him back to the tree branch. Gherkin was glaring at him. "Hey, cousin, what gives?"

His tongue was too thick, his fur prickling against him like pins, and it was Elizabeth who spoke. "We thought you were dead. A flash flood knocked a hole in the barge; Clem and me, we didn't know, I mean, I saw you floating and I grabbed you and you weren't breathing and . . . and . . . " She shook her head quickly, water spraying from her topknot. "But you're all right now, aren't you?"

Gherkin blinked at the human. "Yeah, I guess." She coughed again, and a shiver rattled through her fur. "A touch of pneumonia, I'm sure, but, yeah, I'm fine." She glanced at Clem. "You all right, cousin?"

"I don't know," he managed to squeak at last. "I really don't know." The water roiled against the trunks of the banyan tree, and Clem thought that he could see eyes peering up from the eddies.

Then, from upriver, a steam whistle blew, pulling Clem's attention away from the rapids below; he raised his head, and the *Timiros*'s launch appeared around the bend. Clem could see a cable attached to the stern of the small boat, and Young Ephram was using the oars to steer a course down the middle of the flooding river; the whistle echoed through the jungle again as the boat came to a stop at the river's bend.

"Ephram!" Clem shouted, and Elizabeth took up the call as well. Clem saw the rat shift in the boat, and a cry of "Ahoy there!" reached his ears.

"Elizabeth," Clem said, "wave your arms; stand up so he can see the orange of your life vest."

Gherkin stumbled out of Elizabeth's lap, and the human rose to her knees, grabbed hold of the branch above, and began waving and shouting. "Ephram! Down here! In the tree!"

The rat's head twisted around, his paws still working the oars, and Clem saw his ears go up and his whiskers twitch when he finally turned enough to see them. He aimed several kicks at the cable lashed-up on the stern; a whistle sounded from around the bend, and the boat began drifting with the flow again. Clem could hear the splash as Young Ephram worked the boat closer to the tree, the creak of the oar locks, the pant of Young Ephram's breath, and then the launch was sliding under their branch. Young Ephram gave the stern three swift kicks, and the boat stopped its slide downriver.

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The rat was still sculling the oars, though, the boat shifting in the water like a kite on its string. "Hurry!" he called over the river's rush. "I'd rather not smash into these banyan trunks!"

Elizabeth picked up Gherkin and lowered her into the boat; Clem gestured for her to go next, and he hopped into the stern after she was settled with the cat in the bow. Young Ephram gestured with his chin. "Look out there, Clem; I've gotta give the old man the signal."

Clem nodded and managed to bunch himself to one end of the stern thwart; Young Ephram reared back and banged five times against the cable lash-up. Through the jungle came a blast of the barge's whistle, and the launch began sliding upriver, Young Ephram hauling on the oars and moving them away from the tangle of tree tops poking above the flood waters.

The rain pattered down as the launch was pulled around the bend. Clem could see Gherkin curled up in Elizabeth's lap, but her sides were moving this time, her paws and whiskers twitching slightly as she snuffled. And when he turned, there was the *Timiros,* still tied along the left bank of the Talia, Old Ephram standing with a paw on the winch controls. Metal stuck in jags from the port side of the cabin, but Clem was amazed at how many crates were still lashed in place.

As they drew up behind the barge, Old Ephram called out, "My table! Did you see any sign of my table?!"

Young Ephram muttered something Clem couldn't hear, then shouted, "No! I think the piranhas got it!"

Clem jerked a claw over his shoulder. "We rode it down as far as the bend there, but then it got away from us."

"A fine thing," the old rat huffed as Clem lashed the boat to one of the tie-up rings and Young Ephram shipped oars. "Well, you might as well come on back aboard. Nothing we can do now; we gotta get to Bentito before the *real* front hits."

Clem was clambering up the three-rung ladder that hung over the barge's stern; he stopped and stared at the rat. "The real front? *That* wasn't real enough for you?" He climbed onto the deck and took the towel Old Ephram held out.

"It was real enough; took five of my crates and my new table, blast it. But it weren't the one we got warned about." He pointed downriver. "*That* one's still coming."

Clem looked back as Elizabeth stepped over the railing, Gherkin draped across her shoulders. The gray of the clouds deepened as they stretched west, just turning the deep black of one monster storm at the very edge of Clem's sight. He blinked at it, then turned back to Old Ephram. "But that won't even be to the coast yet!"

Old Ephram shrugged. "Like I said, that's the storm we got warned

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about." He turned his good eye toward Young Ephram coming over the rail. "Get that line off, boy, and haul the launch back on board. I don't wanna be any nearer this river than Belzaire's tavern when *that* storm hits." He crooked a claw at Elizabeth. "Guess you all better ride in the pilot house where it's warm." He wrinkled his snout and spat into the river. "Can't *stand* folks in my pilot house. . . ." He turned and stalked back along the deck.

Clem heard Gherkin give a snort. "I hate earths where the rats are bigger'n me!" She jumped down from Elizabeth's shoulder, took a few shaky steps, slipped and fell sideways. She blinked once, then started licking the fur along her flank. "*Almost* as much as I hate swimming."

Elizabeth squatted down next to her. "I know what you mean. Let's just get out of here, okay?"

"What?" The cat looked at her. "Betty, my girl—"

"Don't call me that!"

"Must I remind you that we are here at your demand to find this River Man and get you back home?"

"River Man!" Elizabeth grimaced. "You heard Clem; it's just a legend. Didn't you say those robots sometimes have a few screws loose? Let's just go. We could wander around here for years and never find anything."

A grin curled through Gherkin's whiskers. "Well, well. And here I'd heard that humans were untrainable. Could it be that our Betty is starting to get a brain?"

"Shut up, Gherk. It's just that, well, this place . . . " she rubbed her upper arms. "It gives me the creeps. There's got to be something we can do with better odds for success than stumbling through a jungle after a creature that doesn't exist."

"*Now* you're talking!" Gherkin rolled upright, wobbled a little, and quickly sat down. "I know some folks around the High Lonesome that might help. It's no picnic getting up there, and they can get sort of nasty themselves, but at least I've dealt with them before and gotten results." She looked at Clem. "Sorry, cousin; rivers just don't appeal to me."

"I understand," Clem said, and the barge shuddered under his paws. "It often surprises even me. Shall we go inside?"

"Amen to that." Gherkin staggered to her paws and slipped through the crates into the cabin.

Elizabeth turned to follow, but Clem put a paw on her arm. "Why didn't you tell her? If she knew what you—"

"Don't even think it!" she snapped, then she shook her head and put her furless paw over Clem's. "If she *knew* about this, she might start thinking, I don't know, that she *owes* me or something. And I don't want that. I don't want her pulling any punches." The smile was strange and

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sideways on her nearly flat face. "She keeps me on my toes, and that's kept me alive this far. So, please, Clem, don't tell her."

Clem couldn't help smiling. "But I'm a *storyteller!*"

She laughed. "Then just wait till we're gone, okay?" The engines throbbed to life, and the barge pulled away from the shore. Young Ephram grinned as he slid past to the winch. "Bentito in twenty minutes. Might as well go inside."

"Thanks, Ephram." Clem turned to Elizabeth. "Go on; I'll be in in a minute."

She patted his paw, then turned and went into the cabin. Clem watched her go and he thought about earths full of humans, about earths ruled by machines and earths ruled by monsters, out far beyond the stars along the gliderumbles. The sky overhead seemed very small, then, the clouds just beyond his reach.

But the river splashed against the barge, and Clem looked down at it, swirling, dark, and suddenly so very strange. He thought about the other stories he told around the fires in the towns and villages along the Talia: the Mothman, the Pygmy Shrews, the tales just as tall as the River Man stories. And that made him smile.

Clem waved to the river, then turned and went into the cabin. ●

FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

THE SUBJECT

I think; therefore I am
The subject of this sentence. Yet you, my dear,
Can't think one thought that's clear,
And even so you are the subject here.
Who'd have thought it of someone like you?
(And who, here, is the subject, too.)
Obviously, it's something anyone can do.

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THE OBJECT

There are some roles I just refuse to fill,
Things you can do for which I lack the skill.
For instance, I can say without repentance
That *I* will never be the object of a sentence.
You, however, with her and all the rest of them,
Are very fine objects, the *crème de la crème.*

THE INDIRECT OBJECT

I have to hand it to you, dear:
You're the indirect pronoun here—
Along with Thelma, Hank, and Hugh.
I tip my hat to all of you.
You've set a fine example to me—
But I don't get it, and I'm gloomy.

THE OBJECT OF THE PREPOSITION

I thought of you and straightway you became
The object of the preposition of.
I thought of her, and it was just the same—
But when I thought of you and me, my love,
The two of us together, I forgot
Every other pronoun I'd been taught.

—Tom Disch

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A HAND IN THE MIRROR

Sonia Orin Lyris

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Sonia Orin Lyris is a 1992 graduate of Clarion West whose stories have sold to *Midnight Zoo* and *Pulphouse*. Ms. Lyris has worked as a software engineer, technical writer, and sculptor. She's published articles on cyberspace, and has studied the martial arts. "A Hand in the Mirror" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.

art: Ron Chironna

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The Stanford campus baked under the late summer sun. Lucius Reskin stepped into the cool air of the Computer Science department offices.

He stopped by Judy's desk and pulled out a half-dozen letters from his mail slot.

Computers were supposed to have done away with paper, he thought irritably. He dropped the junk mail into a trash can.

"Morning, Professor Reskin," Judy said amicably. She punched a ringing phone, scrawled something on a scrap of paper and downed half a mug of coffee, all in one motion.

"Your ten o'clock is in," she added.

He nodded and walked down the hall to his office. Maria Lomelli waited in the hall, carrying a large binder of notes.

On time. As usual.

The few truly brilliant students he'd had were never on time, and their notes, if they had any, were scrawled on envelopes, napkins, scraps of newspaper, or even their own hands.

"Good morning, Ms. Lomelli," he said. He unlocked his office door, held it open for her.

Tenure meant he could have his pick of the larger offices, but he preferred to keep this one, where he had been for six years. Even if it was a little crowded. The top of his desk was completely hidden beneath piles of papers, journals, and books. The coffee maker sat atop a stack of books in one corner, and his console sat in the other corner.

"Have a seat," he said to Maria, motioning to one of the two chairs in the room, both of which Lucius made a point of keeping clear.

Maria sat, her binder on her lap, her back straight, her eyes straight ahead. Lucius found his mug, punched the button that set the coffee to brewing, sat down behind his desk.

She was neatly dressed, her frizzy brown hair captured in a knot at her neck.

His desk only looked cluttered; he knew where everything was, but had long ago stopped trying to explain that to anyone else. He moved a few piles to retrieve Maria's thesis proposal.

"So much for the paperless office of the future, eh?" he said.

She smiled briefly, as though she were uncertain if it were a joke.

Lucius skimmed the first page of her proposal, then tossed it on a pile of papers near her side of the desk.

"I can't make heads or tails of this," he said. "Tell me what it says in English."

Her jaw dropped.

"But—" she exhaled. "Professor Reskin, last month you told me to write up my proposal."

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"Yes. And today I'm telling you that this is just technical mumbo-jumbo. All you've done is cite some cyberspace research and a few ancient psychological explanations of human perception. I'm hoping that when you say it out loud, it will sound like something we can use."

She blinked, her mouth still open in surprise. She would doubtless need a few moments. Lucius got up, poured himself some coffee, and tossed in a couple of cream cubes.

Grad student theses usually bored him. Most were just rehashed academic trash. Few students gave a damn about their studies, and of those who did, fewer still were capable of original work. Most were just waiting to get letters after their names.

Maria, for all her faults, was not one of those. Her ideas were rough, but in them lay a kernel of originality.

It was her timing that was flawed. She was years too late.

He sat down again. "Ms. Lomelli?"

She closed her mouth. "All right," she said. "The system I'm proposing is a natural extension of existing cyberspaces. We already know how to simulate the physical reality with visual, aural, and olfactory sensory stimulus. We already use standard human inputs: voice, gloves, eye-tracking, physiological signs such as pulse, respiration—"

"Ms. Lomelli," Lucius interrupted, "I know the state of the art in cyberspace. I assume that's why I'm your advisor. What's original here?"

"Professor Reskin, this is background I'm building on—"

"Build more succinctly."

She inhaled, held it, exhaled.

"All right," she said. "I think too little research has been done on the *input* side, from the human to the computer. I think we can model not just what the human is *doing* but what the human is *thinking*—"

"Mind-reading computers?" Lucius smiled.

Confusion and annoyance flickered across her face. "If we combine current cyberspace technology, modeling approaches, and some psychological theories about perception, we might be able to design a system that provides collaborative model-building between human and computer, using the cyperspace as a virtual reality."

"We already do that," Lucius said. "Cyberspace *is* a virtual reality."

She shook her head. "But not like what I'm proposing. What we have now is a limited virtual reality, based on simple sensory exchange. It's really just an extension of passive entertainment—like TV and cspace dramas. Sure, there's the human-to-computer input side—voice, eye-movement, gloves—but the computer makes no attempt to model each person's conception of the virtual reality as it's created."

Lucius took a sip of coffee.

"You can't model someone's thought processes just by watching them.

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Even humans are abysmally bad at that, as you should know from your studies."

Maria nodded, encouraged. "Not by simply watching, no, but by asking the right questions—"

"Ah. I see," Lucius said. "Your system will ask people questions, and then tell them what they're thinking. Very original."

Maria took a deep breath. "There may be other physical ways to pick up input from a person. Perhaps eye-tracking as a map to some sorts of brain activity, or tone of voice. I don't know. But by combing *all* the physical inputs and examining them, while interactively pursuing a *mutual* understanding of basic conceptual classifications, the computer can perhaps begin to build a model of each person and their intent in the cspace."

"Sounds pretty speculative."

"It's *research,* professor. Of *course* it's speculative."

"Yes, it's research. But there has to be something real to back it up. What would you do with such a system, if you had it? What's it good for?"

She started shuffling through her papers.

"Well, sir, that's not entirely clear yet. I have a paper by Dr. David Samuels at Berkeley. He's trying to use psychological modeling as an aid to treating mentally disturbed patients. Maybe—"

"I know Samuels' work. But I don't think your system's attempt to guess what someone is thinking by watching eye-movement is going to go over well with him. Even psychologists like a little more scientific method in their research."

Lucius paused. "I take it," he said, "your cognitive psychology is a little weak."

Her nostrils flared. "Not really," she said tightly. "I have a minor in cognitive psychology, along with my degree in computer science."

"A minor. I see. Very impressive."

Maria clenched her jaw.

Lucius sighed. "Ms. Lomelli," he said, "I know it may seem like I'm trying to sabotage your thesis, but that's not what I'm here for. I have a lot of experience in this area. You don't. That's why grad students have advisors."

She nodded a little.

"In any case, Ms. Lomelli, something like this was tried four years ago at Berkeley. It didn't work. I hope you already knew that."

"Yes," she said, suddenly animated again. "I've looked at Jaeger's research, and I think his approach was too limited; he didn't understand psychological modeling, and his system wasn't interactive enough. I really think I can—"

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"I think you're trying too hard, Ms. Lomelli. Are you so desperate for a degree that you'd pursue a thesis built of this kind of flimsy research?" He shook his head. "I know there are professors who believe that the research effort is more important than the results, but I'm not one of them."

She stared at him.

"Ms. Lomelli, you seem to have a great deal of passion about your research. I admire that. Consider pursuing a thesis related to education in cyberspace instead. There is a tremendous amount of interest in this area. I even have some funding for research. I think with your background you would be entirely qualified to pursue this sort of thesis. I'd be happy to help you find a suitable topic if you have any trouble."

"You're saying you won't accept my thesis proposal."

"It isn't a question of my acceptance. There isn't a thesis here."

"But—"

"Ms. Lomelli, are you old enough to remember 'Artificial Intelligence'?"

"Of course."

"We still use the term, but it doesn't mean quite what it did in the eighties. Then it was the magic technology, and everyone was doing it. But in the end it was just computer science and solid engineering mixed together, and there wasn't any need to give it a fancy name just to get some work done."

Her hands lay limp, on top of the binder in her lap.

"But for a while there," Lucius continued, "a lot of people thought that if they could just mix enough computing power with the right kind of software, they'd get intelligent machines."

He smiled.

"And now, Ms. Lomelli, you're saying that if we can just mix enough computing power with *cyberspace,* we'll get a machine that reads minds."

Maria looked down at her hands. Lucius stood, picked her paper off the desk, and offered it to her. She took it, put it carefully on top of her binder, and stood.

For a moment her eyes flickered and she looked as though she might say something more. Lucius waited. She looked down again.

"Think about my offer, Maria. It's a good one."

After a few moments she left.

Evan Ikuta came into the office and grinned.

"Hi. How goes it," he said. He glanced around distractedly, walked to the door, and looked into the hallway.

"Where's the lady?" he asked. "I'm late; she's later."

Lucius rubbed his temples. The interview with Maria had not been

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reassuring. Time was slipping away from them. He started another pot of coffee.

"Evan. Brew?" he asked.

"Naw. Sara says it disrupts my aura, makes me hyper. I'm restricted." He grinned again.

Lucius couldn't always tell when Evan was serious, but it didn't matter, because Evan got the job done. His thesis work was impressive enough that Lucius had pulled strings to get Evan an assistant professorship the moment Evan graduated. He'd been grateful and then had joined Lucius' three-person team.

"Here she is," Evan said.

Professor Deborah Moreno was a small, slender woman, with short brown hair. She dressed simply and conservatively.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "Joseph has the flu. I had to take him from daycare to sickcare."

Evan closed the door to the office. Lucius no longer needed to say anything about privacy when they discussed ALICE. They all knew.

"Evan," Lucius said, "the optimizations you made last week work fine. Deborah, can we slow down the feedback response? The focus-loop is a real problem."

Deborah nodded. "I think all we have to do is to introduce more noise as the focus gets tighter if the resource level isn't changing."

Lucius nodded. "Work with Evan on that. See if you can get something ready—is tomorrow too soon, Evan?"

Evan shook his head with a grin. Evan loved pressure—thrived on it, like most really good programmers. Those who hadn't burned out, that was. The best always did, and the better they were, the fewer the years they had to do top-notch work. Lucius took the time to review all of Evan's code. Evan was still in his prime.

"What's the system doing with input, Deborah? Are we seeing patterns yet?"

She sighed. "Lucius, we *have* to have more than just the three of us as test cases. Yes, there are patterns, there are *always* patterns. But neither I nor ALICE can make generalizations until we have more test cases, more sensory output to examine. The meaning of the SQUID brain-magfield map is still largely experimental. We need more test subjects."

Lucius frowned, tapping his pen on a stack of papers. "I don't want it to get out yet. We're too close."

"Hey," Evan said. "We can get more test cases. Just grab some undergrads and hook them up for a few hours. Tell them it's another cspace. You think they'll understand what's going on from an hour in ALICE? Naw. Tell them it's an experiment in subjective visual hallucinations

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based on random input or something. Tell them they're making it all up."

Lucius frowned.

"Lucius," said Deborah, "we can't generalize without more data."

"First," Lucius said, "I want the three of us to link in to ALICE together. ALICE is supposed to be able to handle more than one person. It's time."

"Uhm," Evan said, looking down. "A lot of stuff that comes out there is—kind of . . . private. You know?"

"I know," Lucius said, "but you can learn to control that. It just takes practice."

"Yeah, right," Evan said, sounding unconvinced.

"Evan," Deborah said, "we're adults. We aren't going to hold your thoughts against you."

"We're breaking new ground here, Evan," Lucius said, in mock-sternness. "Do you want to be left out?"

"Naw," Evan grinned. "Not me."

"That's better," Lucius said. "The paper's almost done. We can publish in a month, if we push."

Deborah looked away. Lucius knew that look; something was wrong, but she wouldn't volunteer it. She was a brilliant sensory-data analyst, one of the best in the country, but she never argued. If he pushed her, she'd fall silent and stay silent, until he found gentler words. Lucius was used to verbal struggles as a natural part of academia. He couldn't understand how she had gotten through her academic career without a similar capability.

"Deborah?" He prompted gently.

"I can't keep leaving Joseph with my mother every weekend," she said. "I'd like to see him once in a while. I can't go on this way indefinitely."

"I know, Deborah. We're almost there. Stay with us. We need you."

Deborah pressed her lips together, then nodded.

They had reserved three separate cspace lab rooms. Deborah thought the privacy might make Evan more comfortable.

Lucius looked around for a moment, to remember the physical reality he knew best. Then he put the helmet on, adjusted the eye-phones and straps, slipped his hands into the gloves, and lay on the couch.

"Begin," he told ALICE.

Evan was already there, so the landscape was his. Trees, flowers, birds, all together in a lush garden. Now ALICE was responding to Lucius's presence, changing the world to the sparse landscape that Lucius favored. Trees and birds faded.

Lucius tried to stop the change. He wanted Evan comfortable, wanted

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Evan's landscape stronger than his own. He concentrated on the trees, birds, and flowers, and ALICE responded, trying to please them both, building a landscape that was somewhere in between.

They stood in a small clearing of grass and wildflowers, surrounded by trees. Lucius looked at the flowers, impressed by the detail and variety. Was that from Evan, or was ALICE filling in more effectively?

Evan looked younger. Lucius gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile. It made Lucius wonder what he looked like in this shared reality. He traced an oval in the air.

"Mirror," he said.

The air shimmered and a mirror appeared. It wasn't quite enough, though, and ALICE knew him well enough to figure out that the mirror was incomplete. He imagined ALICE checking her libraries for something to add. A carved mahogany frame appeared around the mirror.

Lucius looked younger in the mirror, the way he had in grad school. He didn't have a beard, which surprised him. Evan's opinion? He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and turned to Evan.

"Where's Deborah?"

Evan knelt down and began picking flowers.

"Maybe she's watching us?" he said.

"Deborah?" Lucius asked the air.

"I'm here," came her reply, sighing on the meadow breeze.

Deborah appeared beside them. Her hair was long and she was dressed in flowing blue. Lucius and Evan stared in surprise. She shrugged.

"I guess we all see ourselves a little differently than others do."

Silently Evan handed Deborah the flowers he had collected. She smiled, took the flowers, and touched them to her hair, where they clung and grew brighter.

The landscape had changed subtly since Deborah arrived. There was the sound of surf in the distance, sea-salt on the air. Sea gulls flew overhead. But the meadow remained intact.

"This isn't so bad," Evan said.

Lucius nodded. "ALICE merges our landscapes quite smoothly. And it seems that more viewpoints give the Scape more depth of detail."

Lucius inhaled, smelling trees, flowers, sea-air. He heard bees nearby, and the distant surf.

"We've done it," he whispered. Years of struggle and secrecy, coming to this moment.

Deborah's clothes began to fade away, leaving her half-dressed, wearing a lacy black corset, stockings, and red high heels.

She looked down at herself and frowned.

Lucius glanced at Evan, who looked stricken. He vanished.

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The landscape changed, becoming a seashore. Deborah's clothes returned.

"Casualty of the medium," Lucius said to her.

She nodded, chuckled. "I just wasn't expecting it."

"We'd better go after him."

She turned to the ocean.

"I like it here, Lucius," she said, sounding relaxed. "It's somehow more—real—with you here."

Lucius wasn't sure he'd ever seen Deborah smile before. He began to understand Evan's fantasy.

Deborah's clothes started to cling, outlining her figure. Lucius shook his head and it stopped. That's what Evan should have done, but it took practice.

"See you in a few minutes," he said. "Stop," he said to the meadow, and he was back in the lab.

He blinked, removed the helmet, and got up from the couch slowly. The Scape could be tiring; the concentration it took to keep images stable was often accompanied by small physical movements. He stretched, left the lab, and found Evan's room.

Evan was sitting on the couch, staring at the floor.

"You're blowing this out of proportion," Lucius said. "It happens. It's not a crime."

Evan shrugged. "Yeah, sure," he said. "I have no control over what I think or feel."

"Oh, come off it, Evan. You just need more practice. You're young."

"I'm not *that* young," Evan snapped.

"Young enough to be thinking about sex with Deborah," Lucius said, smiling into Evan's pain.

Evan couldn't resist the joke. He grinned. "Yeah, yeah." Then he sighed. "Did I ruin our experiment?"

"No. But next time I think you should stay and see how she looks completely naked, after all your trouble."

Evan shook his head, but he was still grinning. "Yeah?"

"Sure. It's a fantasyland, Evan. The rules are different. You know that. Deborah knows it, too."

On cue, Deborah opened the door, and hesitantly walked in. She looked at Evan with concern.

"Black really isn't my color," she said, gently.

"Oh God, I'm sorry," he said.

Deborah shook her head. "Don't worry. Really. It's forgotten."

Evan looked away. "Thanks."

Lucius looked at them both for a moment and then stood.

"All right, let's get back to work."

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Deborah was sitting in Lucius's other chair. She drooped a little, Lucius thought, like a flower gone too long without water.

They had all been working long hours, for months now. He on the paper, Deborah on the testing, and Evan doing most of the programming.

But now it was all coming together, and Lucius felt invigorated. Not at all tired.

"We have a waiting list of undergrads who want to be test subjects, Lucius," Deborah said.

"Good."

"A *long* list, Lucius. ALICE is getting very popular. And some of the students are sure we're hiding something. They know the Scape isn't an ordinary cspace. Most of them don't care, they just want their time in ALICE, to play. Now the faculty are asking me questions, too."

"Damn," Lucius said. "I didn't expect it to happen this fast. We'll push. We'll get the paper out by next week. How's the testing going?"

"That's the good news. It looks like there really are some generalizable types who conceptualize in specific ways. It's not as simple as visually-oriented versus verbally-oriented, but it's similar. ALICE can use this information to fine-tune her model of each individual once they're in the Scape."

Lucius picked up a pen, tapped it on a pile of papers.

"Why is ALICE so popular?"

"Computer games," Deborah said. "Most of these kids were raised on them, so they aren't lost in an artificial reality where they don't know the rules." She shrugged. "That's what a lot of games are all about, so most catch on quickly. Then there's the third that quit."

"Why do they quit?"

"I think it's hard work for some of them, creating reality every moment. And then there's the privacy issue; some are so uncomfortable having their thoughts take on form, that they don't stay long enough to learn control."

"I'd like to mention the failure rate in the paper. What's your take on the cause?"

Deborah hesitated. "It would only be a guess."

"Then guess."

"Well," she said, "the ones who do best are those who don't have a constrained view of reality. Those with a strictly ordered world-view get panicky in the Scape, because everything is constantly changing. We can usually identify them by their vital signs."

"Those are probably the ones who'll end up as instructors at Stanford," Lucius said dryly.

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Deborah chuckled and shook her head. "They're young, Lucius. Give them time. We were young, once, too."

Lucius looked at her with a barely perceptible smile.

"Well," she said, still smiling, "not *you*, of course, Professor. You were never young."

He matched her grin and she chuckled again, picking up the papers she'd brought with her, and standing to go. Despite how tired she was, she looked good. Maybe it was the smile.

"Deborah," he said, "one more thing."

"Yes?"

Lucius considered what he had decided to say, rehearsed it once, and then again. It still didn't sound right. A minute passed and Deborah slowly sat down.

Maybe it was just the wrong time, the long hours affecting his judgment. Less palatable was his suspicion that it had been so long that he had lost whatever knack he once had. In any case, he didn't have the time now, not when there was so much else at stake.

"I was thinking," he found himself saying, "that we might have dinner together."

Her frown deepened.

Worse than the wrong time, he realized. He had misjudged their warming friendship, and now she was wondering how to reject his advance. A smooth relationship with Deborah was essential, perhaps now more than ever. What had he been thinking?

"It's all right," he said, giving her an easy smile. "I understand. And you don't need to explain."

"Thanks," she said, nodding. "Dinner. Yes. I'd like that. Tonight?"

Lucius had to replay her words to be sure he had heard her correctly. It surprised him a little to discover that it mattered, that it mattered more than a little.

Her eyes were hazel, he noticed for the first time, and there was a small smile on her lips that he was sure he'd never seen before.

Suddenly he was very curious about her.

Deborah walked into Lucius's office. He held up the *Mercury News* science section.

"I saw it this morning," she said, grinning.

Lucius stood up, still holding the newspaper, and walked around the desk to her. He gave her a short, passionate kiss and she stroked his beard.

"Not very technical, though," she said, with a nod at the article.

"We don't want it to be." He picked up the article and scanned it again.

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The right kind of attention at the right time—that's what this was about. He'd told the reporter very little of substance about the Scape.

Then he'd posted a brief description of ALICE to world-net's cyberspace newsgroup, giving more tantalizing, vague hints about the Scape. In under a day, his posting had traveled to every net-connected lab in the world.

"I'm getting about fifty e-mail queries a day from the net."

Deborah's eyebrows drew together a bit. "Are you answering them?"

"Absolutely."

"But the paper in the *Cyberspace Journal*—"

Lucius held up a hand. "I'm not giving anything away. No hard facts. Appetizers. I tell them to wait for the paper to come out in the *Journal* next month."

"Then why post at all?"

Lucius poured himself a cup of black coffee and sat down.

"I want them hungry for details, Deborah. And then I want them starving, right about the time the paper is published. The smaller newspapers—the *Metro*, Stanford *Daily*—they'll be coming around soon, too. Probably next week. I'll make sure they have the names of undergrads who have been playing in the Scape. Castles and dragons make for excellent non-technical reading."

Lucius glanced at the red dot on his console; he had received new mail in the last few minutes. Probably more queries.

Deborah looked suspiciously at the half pot of coffee. "Is this fresh?"

"Compared to what?" Lucius replied distractedly.

Lucius hit a few keys to bring up his e-mail. He was getting e-mail queries from research labs everywhere, except Stanford. The Stanford faculty was politely curious, but reserved. The few who knew enough to guess at what ALICE really was had been hounding the department chair to support Lucius's research, to ride the tide of the breakthrough before it passed them by. And yesterday the department chair had phoned him.

"Johnson called me yesterday," Lucius said, scanning screenfuls of new mail.

"Did he. Why?" Deborah sniffed at the coffee pot and turned away with a wince.

"He wants me to give a small presentation on ALICE to a few faculty members."

"Should I be there?" she asked, picking up the newspaper.

Lucius hit a few keys to send his pre-written reply to the new queries and shook his head. "I'll be fine."

"Lucius, Evan's name isn't in the article at all."

He took a sip of cold coffee. "No. I didn't see any point in mentioning

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him. Evan's not a particularly good speaker, so it doesn't do us any good to have him talking to the press. And this is a good time for him to take a break, with the brunt of the programming work done."

"Done? But the enhancements we've been planning—"

"There are always enhancements. It's time to concentrate on getting the word out. We've got to freeze the code as it stands."

"Evan knows about this?"

Lucius hit a few more keys on his console, disposing of the rest of his new e-mail, and turned to face Deborah.

"I've been busy. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

Deborah looked doubtful.

"We'll talk about expanding ALICE down the line," he said. "Then we'll need Evan. For now, though, the system is fairly solid, and I know the code almost as well as Evan did. Besides, he's due for a break, don't you think?"

She exhaled and nodded. "I think we're all due for a break. So, what's next?"

"Next we celebrate. How about dinner?"

"Sorry, Lucius. I promised Joseph I'd be home tonight to play with him."

"All right." Lucius nodded. "We'll take him out with us."

"Lucius . . ."

He stood and stepped close to her.

"And to the Zoo on Saturday," he said, touching two fingertips to her cheek and tracing them over her lips. "How does that sound?"

Deborah smiled.

"Ah. The Z-word," she said. "How can I resist?"

Lucius sat on a couch, looking at the cspace helmet in his hands. Ten years ago the Scape was only a grad student's dream, and now his paper was published in the prestigious *Cyberspace Journal*. The *Journal's* review committee hadn't even bothered to ask him for a rewrite.

It was time to celebrate. He lay down on the couch.

"Begin," he told ALICE.

And he was in the Scape. Green, grassy hills and soft blue sky stretched as far as he could see.

The students who played in the Scape made ALICE into a competitive adventure game. That was what they expected from ALICE, so that was what she gave them. But in time there would be others: engineers, artists, scientists—anyone who wanted to create and design would come to the Scape to do their significant work.

That day was very close now.

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But to celebrate—what did he want? He thought of the things he had always wanted. Then he remembered the car, and smiled.

She drove up behind him and passed him with the sound of a deep purr. Then she stopped, revved slightly. Teasingly.

A black, '84 Lamborghini Countache. Not just a machine, but a thing of beauty. Her black shell reflected the Scape with dark clarity, capturing sparkles of sunlight and distant hills. She was waxed to a wet-looking sheen. He reached out and touched her, saw the reflection of his hand grow. His finger left a perfect fingerprint.

The illusion was marvelous. Did ALICE know what this car could do? He almost hoped not. As beautiful as it was, it didn't measure up to the high-performance sports cars of its time.

But here in the Scape it could do anything.

He got in. The seats were plush burgundy, the dashboard polished wood, the wheel leather-wrapped. The engine growled at him. She wanted to go.

He chuckled. Of course she did. He patted the dashboard.

"Let's go, babe," he heard himself say, enjoying the cliché of his own words. What was a fantasy for, after all?

He drove along a road, over hills, up and down the smooth, gentle rises.

The empty road opened up before him, stretching straight into infinity. A deep blue sky stretched above, peppered with soft, fluffy clouds. The car flew onto the road, hungry and growling.

While ALICE could not simulate the effect of movement on his inner ear, the visual and sound effects were convincing enough. This was his dream, come alive.

In the distance, a small figure appeared on the side of the road. As he neared, he saw she was hitchhiking. He pulled the car over to the side of the road and watched her walk to the passenger side in his rear-view mirror. Something about her was familiar. But that made sense; she was his Scape-creation.

She opened the car door and got in.

He frowned. He had barely thought of Maria since his last interview with her. Why would he be thinking of her now?

He chuckled. "What perverted fantasy of mine created you here, Maria?"

"I don't know, professor, what perverted fantasy of yours makes you a megalomaniac?"

Then it was clear; he had not created an image of Maria. It was her.

"Welcome to the Scape, Ms. Lomelli," he said.

"A moment ago it was 'Maria.' " She shook her head. "Can't you decide whether I'm a real person or not, professor? Gosh, professor, I'm always

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sorry to see a man who is so desperate to have his name on an invention that he'd crush anyone in his path."

"See it anyway you like, Maria," he said, pointedly using her first name. "But your thesis proposal *was* weak, and the work *had* been done. Was, in fact, *being* done. Hardly an original idea, and by now that would have been all too clear and you would have been that much further behind."

"You could have told me, you bastard."

"Could I? What for? I've been working on this for years, Maria."

"Of course. I'm just a grad student. I couldn't possibly have had anything to add."

"Probably not," he agreed.

Her eyes narrowed. "Then how did I come up with the same idea you did?"

"When the technology reaches a certain level of development, similar ideas rise to the surface."

"I hope you rot in the pits of hell," she said softly.

He held on to his patience. "New technology is competitive, Maria."

"What about the free exchange of knowledge that universities are so famous for?"

"Read my paper."

"Oh, *right*. Now that your goddamned name is on it."

"Yes, now that my goddamned name is on it."

She shot him a furious look.

He was getting tired of this, but he would try one last time.

"You had a good idea, but you didn't have it first, and you didn't have it best. That's the way it goes sometimes. You think I've taken something from you, but I haven't. You never had it. Maybe you should stop blaming me for your past and start thinking about your future."

She shook her head. "That doesn't justify the way you treated me."

"I don't have to justify anything. You're young and you think the world should be handed to you on a silver platter. Grow up."

She spat at him, but the Scape-spit vanished as soon as it landed.

"I think we're done," Lucius said.

The seat was empty.

She'd probably be back. But then, the Scape was the best place for her to vent her frustration at him; anything was possible and everything was safe. It was a poor way to build a future at the university, but he doubted she was thinking about that now.

He pulled back onto the road, pressed the accelerator to the floor and watched the speedometer climb to eighty, one-hundred, one-twenty, then one-forty. Trees went by in a blur.

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He grinned as ALICE simulated his car ride in realtime as well as any cspace racing game around.

One-eighty, and the car just wanted to go faster.

Suddenly there was a dark, gray shape on the road before him, stretching from the road to the sky. It was only a Scape-image, but his gut-level fear of tornados had him already braking.

It had to be Maria's creation. He pulled his foot off the brake, floored the accelerator, and drove the car right into the center of the darkness.

The tornado screamed around him as it tried to tear the car apart. He concentrated fiercely, fighting to submerge his fear, to change his conception of the tornado.

It was a tiny dust-devil. A swirling fog. A soft breeze. He had never seen a real tornado, so it had to be a monster. Fantasy. Unreal.

He refused to think of the wind, and thought only of summer breezes, soft flowers, the sound of birds, and the purr of cats.

The transition was abrupt.

He was standing in a large meadow of high grasses, watching a small, lithe grey cat, who was watching a robin on a low branch of a nearby tree. The cat was transfixed, intent, its tail twitching. The robin was oblivious, or acting it; with wings it could afford to. It was timeless drama, repeated here in the Scape in all the simplicity and elegance of real life.

Lucius inhaled meadow scents, listened to the birds, and reinforced the image against Maria's next intrusion.

He could tell the Scape to remove her. But the only way to find out what the Scape could do was to let people use it and see what happened. If they wanted to indulge their fantasies, he would allow it, and if Maria wanted to exact revenge against him, he would allow that, too.

He heard the low, gutteral roar of a big cat. He turned. A large black jaguar stared back at him, its tail twitching furiously. It growled again.

Lucius liked cats, even big ones, but there was something about the voice of a big cat this close that was hard to take lightly.

Not real, he reminded himself.

The cat crouched to spring. He decided to give Maria the first move.

"Even the Scape has limitations, Maria," he said, quietly, knowing she would hear him anyway.

The cat sprang at him. He saw sky and the cat's black head at his neck.

There was no sensation, of course, because ALICE could not generate any, but the sound of the cat snapping his Scape-neck and crunching through the cartilage was realistic enough. He could smell the cat. Then he could smell his own blood.

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He was probably Scape-dead, but since he didn't believe it, ALICE wouldn't either. He tilted his head up to see better.

He regretted it almost immediately. The cat had a paw on his shoulder and was gnawing on his forearm, tearing strings of flesh away from his bone. Blood soaked the cat's muzzle, the arm, and the tatters of his shirt.

The cat stopped and looked at him a moment, its green eyes bright. Then it tugged on his arm, trying to disconnect it from the rest of his body. There was a pop.

Lucius felt queasy. He was grateful that tactile simulation technology was still prohibitively rudimentary. But what ALICE might lack in ability to generate sensation, she made up for in vivid images, sound, and smell, all of which Lucius was finding surprisingly convincing.

He could stop and leave the Scape anytime. But that would give Maria her victory. No, he would take what she could give. This was his world. He had made it, and he would not run from it.

He could, however, run *with* it. Maria was watching now, of that he was sure. He would give her more.

Maria was wrong, he decided. A cat like this would not settle for an arm when a belly and delicate internal organs were available. He strengthened his conviction. The cat dropped the ruined arm, sniffed at his chest, and moved toward his stomach.

He wasn't sure he wanted to watch this time, so he thought with his eyes closed, listening to the sounds of the cat tearing into flesh. He visualized the liver and other internal organs that a cat might like, while trying to ignore the sounds of his success. He counted on ALICE's libraries to make the images as realistic as possible. He heard the cat rip organs loose, drop them on the ground, and start chewing on them.

"Oh my *God,*" Maria cried. "*No.*"

Stay, Lucius thought, encouraging the cat. *Stay and feast.*

He opened his eyes. Maria stood a few yards away, staring at his stomach, which was now in bloody pieces across the grass.

She met his gaze and her eyes widened. Then she turned away and he heard her retch.

She turned back and looked at him again, seeming as fascinated as she was horrified. Lucius nudged the cat again with his mind. The beast stopped chewing and walked over to her, rubbing his head affectionately against her side, leaving blood stains on her hands. She continued to watch him, frozen.

This was, Lucius reflected, as bizarre a confrontation as he had ever had.

"So," he said softly. "You've won, Maria. See? I'm dead. Are you happy now?"

It was ironic that her continued fascination helped keep his image

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vivid in the Scape. The big cat rubbed against her again. She jerked her hand away with a whimper.

"This isn't real." She looked at the cat.

He laughed. "No, it's not, Maria. Not real. Of course not."

She backed away from him, the cat, the clearing.

"You're doing something to me. What are you doing to me?"

"Sharing the Scape with you. Come on, Maria, you know how this works."

"I didn't do this. This isn't me. It isn't." She shook her head, denying everything.

He snorted. "Believe what you like, Maria. I can always ask ALICE to give me a record of exactly what data she got from you and what she got from me. Then we can see what is and isn't you."

She breathed a sob. Her face, usually careful and rigid, was now all raw, vulnerable fear. Maria vanished from the Scape.

Lucius popped up his umbrella as soon as he got off the rail. He splashed his way through the campus grounds toward his office.

Judy nodded at him and tipped her head toward his office, indicating that he had a visitor. Lucius walked down the hall to his office.

He looked at her for a moment, and she looked away. He unlocked the door and went in, leaving the door open. After a moment she followed.

Lucius peeled off his raincoat, set his umbrella to dripping in a corner, and punched the coffee machine to brew. He sat down.

"So, Ms. Lomelli," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Maria stared out the window behind him.

"I want to talk to you about what happened in the Scape last week," she said, still standing, still looking past him. "I want to apologize."

"You mean for attacking me?" Lucius asked.

"Yes."

"I see."

"I was—upset. I know I shouldn't have behaved the way I did." She looked at him briefly and then away. "I didn't mean it to happen the way it did."

"No? How did you mean it to happen, then?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it, and turned away.

"I was upset."

"The Scape does a pretty good job of manifesting intent, Ms. Lomelli. I have to conclude that you meant it to happen exactly the way it did, whether you regret it now or not."

"At the time," she said slowly, "well—yes. But I've had time to think. You were right. About a lot of things."

Lucius waited. "Is there anything else?"

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"I—" she said. She sat down in the second chair. "It won't happen again."

Lucius nodded. "So?"

"So, I—want to work in cyberspace research. With you, Professor Reskin. I've read your paper on ALICE. I've been following all the net discussions. What you've done—it's amazing, in some ways so obvious—" she glanced at him quickly, "I mean obvious in the way that some things are once you see them. And you were right, there was more to it than I thought."

She looked at him finally, her expression hopeful. "I want you to continue to be my advisor, Professor. I'll take your advice." She nodded. "Completely. I'll do whatever thesis you think I should."

Lucius considered her. "I appreciate your interest in my work, Ms. Lomelli. And I appreciate your new willingness to take my advice.

"But there's a problem. The Scape is the first truly, objectively shared reality mankind has ever had. It's nearly mind-to-mind contact, which we've wanted for a long time. The way a person sees in the Scape is *active,* and how you think is more important than what you think. Knowing your thoughts well enough to use them instead of having them use you is essential."

She nodded. "I understand that."

"I don't think you have those qualities. I don't think you're well-suited for this kind of research."

She stared at him, her dark eyebrows drawing close together. "I don't understand."

It just wasn't enough that she was sincere and dedicated. Maybe if he had brought her in years ago—but probably not, even then. He hadn't had time then, and he didn't have it now. There were a lot of people who wanted in on the Scape. There wasn't enough room.

"What do you mean?" she asked again. "I made one mistake. Just one." There was an edge to her voice.

"I'm not here to pave the way for you," Lucius said, trying to soften the words. "You don't have a right to do anything you want, you only have the right to try."

Her left hand clutched the chair's arm. Her right hand made a claw and then a fist. She looked past him. "Give me a chance."

"I did," he said simply, regretting the inevitable path this conversation had taken.

"I can change," she said. "I can learn."

"I'm sure you can, and I'm sure you will. But not from me. I don't have the time."

Her right fist opened, tensed into a claw, relaxed, then tensed again. Her eyes were wide.

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"Ms. Lomelli," he said.

She looked down at her hand, made a small sound, then put her head in her hands. She began to shake, silently crying. Lucius sighed, wishing he could be somewhere else.

"Maria," he said.

She looked up, her cheeks wet. "What do I do now?" she asked.

"Find another advisor."

"And another school?"

"That's up to you."

She stood.

"Maria," Lucius said. She stopped and turned half away, so he saw only her profile. "A piece of advice. If this defeats you, then maybe research isn't your area. No one held any doors open for me, and they won't for you. That's how it is."

"No one helped you, so you don't help anyone else?" She gave a short, bitter laugh. "Is this a university or a jungle?"

"What's the difference?" He shook his head. "If you don't see that, then you aren't cut out for this type of work."

"Only the strong survive?"

"No. Many survive. Only the strong *succeed.*"

Her right hand tensed into a fist again.

"Don't you ever have *doubts,* Professor?"

"Doubts? About what?"

She shook her head, opened the door and left.

The rain began again outside, coming down in heavy pats against the window. After a while Lucius got up and poured himself a cup of coffee.

He stopped on his way to his office at Judy's desk, to pick up his paper mail. At the bottom of the small pile of envelopes was a newspaper clipping. A yellow marker had been used to highlight his name and Maria Lomelli's.

Judy looked up from her typing.

"Oh, Professor Reskin, I'm sorry. I'll try to keep a better watch and see who's putting those in with your mail."

"That's okay, Judy. The small papers have as much right to twist facts and invent evidence as the professional rags do. Any other messages?"

"Professor Moreno was by. She said she'd be in the Scape for the performance this morning, that you could find her there."

"Thanks."

"Professor?" Judy looked up at him. "I just wanted to say, we're all very proud of your paper in the *Journal.* No matter what the press says."

"It's a measure of my success, Judy; the press wouldn't bother slamming me if my work wasn't important."

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Judy smiled and nodded. "That's the spirit, Professor."

Lucius handed the clipping to Judy, who crumpled it into a ball and dropped it in a trash basket.

Down the hall, on his office door, was another copy of the same newspaper article, this one highlighted in red. He pulled it off, opened the door, and went in.

He checked his e-mail, and then found an empty cspace lab and linked in.

ALICE had created a sunny day for the performance. Across a large, grassy meadow were animals and people dressed in colorful outfits, waiting for the performance to begin.

The air smelled of wine, beer, and—various smokes. Lucius chuckled. Legal and illegal substances abounded, since they existed in the Scape in appearance and odor only. ALICE's original olfactory library did not include some of the scents he recognized now, which meant that Scape participants were mixing and matching, as expected, extending ALICE's library.

Two small children ran through the crowd, both giggling furiously and throwing popcorn at each other. They were probably constructs, since Deborah had decided that children should not yet be allowed into the Scape. Someone must have decided that the day needed children. Lucius agreed, and watched them a moment, lending his attention to them to reinforce their existence.

He looked for Deborah. There were tables with large umbrellas to keep out the Scape-sun. An aproned man stopped at a table where a girl in a blue dress and white pinafore sat, primly drinking from a large tea cup.

Of course. ALICE probably had a full complement of Lewis Carroll's characters in her libraries by now. Lucius looked around and saw animated cards and chess pieces scattered through the crowd, delivering drinks and food. These were doubtless constructs as well. Like the children, they were the supporting cast in a drama where every participant was a star.

At one table a Jabberwock curled around a chair and rested its head on the table top, conversing with a mouse in a small lounge chair. Elsewhere a gryphon and a large, grinning cat sat together eating chocolate sundaes.

He saw Deborah and threaded through the crowd to reach her.

"Hello," he said, sitting down.

"Lucius," she said with a smile.

She was lovely here, and his attention helped; her long Scape-hair shone and her eyes sparkled.

Loud voices distracted him. The mouse had left its chair and was prancing around on the table top, waving a tiny gun threateningly at a

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large cat who was smiling and hissing back. The man in the apron had stepped up and was waving his hands at both of them.

"Lucius," Deborah said, nodding her head, "over there: they're staring at you."

Creatures at other tables were looking at him, whispering to each other, and pointing.

"So they are."

Deborah was thoughtful. "Here in the Scape you and I have the freedom to be anyone we want, yet we choose to be ourselves. What do you think that says about us, Lucius?"

"You're the psychologist, Deborah. What does it say about them that they don't?"

Thunder slammed across the sky, stunning everyone into silence. Shots of lightning flashed through the air, leaving yellow and green afterimages. The rumbling sound gradually faded into the distance, followed by a mix of whispers and chimes.

The sky dimmed from daylight to soft dusk. Wisps of clouds, tinted pink and violet, framed the gathering stars. Against the dark sky grew block letters that glowed moon-white. They announced the name of the performance and the artist: "Intimate Responses, a Cyber-Scape performance, by Phyllis Leigh."

Then there was a loud popping sound, and each letter exploded into sparks of white light, falling onto the audience like the trails of fireworks.

There were startled yells. A furry creature stood, swearing and hitting himself to put out the sparks on his fur. A writhing spark fell on the table and erupted into a small white flame. Lucius held his hand out like a gun and squirted water on the flame with his finger until it went out.

"What happened?" Deborah asked.

Lucius looked around. The sparks went out, and as they did, creatures started pointing at Lucius and whispering again.

"The audience has taken over the show," he said.

It was a matter of attention; the audience had been distracted from the sky show by the falling sparks and ALICE had followed their interest. Now the sparks were turning into flames all across the meadow, reinforcing the audience's belief that the sparks would behave this way, the belief feeding back into the flames. When the flames were put out, much of the audience was staring at Lucius.

The sky was lightening. Stars dimmed and vanished. The performance was clearly over.

"Nice idea," Lucius said, standing. "We'll need to work out a few bugs so that Ms. Leigh can get past the credits next time."

Deborah stood. The furry creature stepped up to their table.

"You're Reskin," he said in an accusing, high-pitched tone. He shook

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a copy of the Stanford *Daily* at Lucius. "We know what you did to Maria Lomelli. You're scum."

"Thanks for sharing your opinion," Lucius said. "Now go away."

A crowd was gathering.

"You should read this, professor. It says she's going to bring charges against you."

"I doubt it. There aren't grounds for any charges," Lucius said.

A tall, silver-haired woman called out: "Was the Scape really Lomelli's idea first, professor?"

"This is not a press conference," Lucius shot back.

"Then why did she leave the university, professor?"

Lucius turned to Deborah. "Amazing, isn't it," he said, in a tone his lecture students would recognize. "They believe everything the media tells them. Their critical faculties have already been crushed into pulp by the same fine journalism that sells breath mints."

"Cute, professor," the furry creature said, "but that's not an answer."

Lucius looked the crowd over. "When you can ask questions without disguises, I might take you more seriously."

Someone growled, and the crowd muttered.

The furry scowled. "Coward."

Lucius laughed. "I'm not the one hiding behind a mask."

"Yeah? Well, you're the one who—"

A wind suddenly picked up, noisily drowning out the creature's voice, along with all the sounds of the crowd.

"What a shame," Lucius said to Deborah, his voice somehow cutting through the wind. "Our best and brightest." He shook his head.

The furry's mouth moved silently. Frustrated, the furry made a gesture at Lucius with his furry middle finger. Lucius resisted the temptation to return the gesture, which would have terminated the furry's link to the Scape.

Even so, the furry's middle finger was mysteriously growing into a large, furry ball which Lucius was sure must be very heavy. The creature dropped to the ground under the weight, cursing and struggling. Members of the crowd looked on, asking concerned questions and generally reinforcing the creature's unfortunate situation.

Lucius could continue to use tricks like these, but there was really no point to continuing the struggle.

"Let's go," he said to Deborah. He envisioned the seashore where they had first talked together in the Scape. The crowd around them wavered and then vanished.

The sound of gulls was in his ears and the world was ocean-scented.

"Quite a show," Deborah said.

Lucius was already working on solutions. "ALICE could route half of

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each participant's resources to the show itself. That would prevent the audience from taking over."

"That's not what I meant."

"Ah." He looked at her. "Some bad press is inevitable."

Deborah looked at the ocean. "How similar was Lomelli's thesis to—" she motioned to take the world, "this?"

"She had ideas similar to those I had years ago."

"And you told her it wouldn't work?"

"I said her research was weak; it was. I said her ideas were unoriginal; they were."

"You discouraged her."

"Yes." He watched Deborah brush her long hair back. "Should I have encouraged her to waste her time? If I'd told her about our work, I'd have risked everything we've done."

Deborah reached down and picked up a sand dollar. She examined it and threw it into the ocean.

"Well?" Lucius asked, beginning to feel frustrated at Deborah's silence. "Should we take her in now, with the best minds in the world begging to get in on the project? Is that what you want?"

Still she did not answer.

"She attacked me in the Scape, Deborah. The newspaper article conveniently fails to mention that. She's emotionally unstable. Would you want to work with someone like that?"

"Lucius," Deborah said, "we're here to teach. Not just to find our own advantage."

"Yes, to teach," Lucius said, "but not to coddle. We teach by doing, not by talking about it. Don't worry about the article, Deborah. We'll get some dirty looks, and a few weeks later the student body will turn its short attention span to some other good cause."

Deborah sat down on the sand and Lucius sat next to her. He started to speak again, then stopped himself. He passed his hand over the ground and a small green plant poked up through the sand. It stretched up and up, spreading itself into leaves and swelling its end into a bud. The bud burst into a large, fragrant red rose.

"It's over, Lucius," Deborah said.

Sunlight dimmed as a cloud passed across the sky.

"Over?"

"I care for you, Lucius, I really do, but—I thought you might care about something besides your own success."

"*My* success? ALICE is *our* success: yours, mine, Evan's."

She pressed her lips together. "Evan, who you wouldn't mention to the press because he might say something inconvenient?"

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"You're upset about *that?* He wouldn't have wanted the press hounding him, Deborah. Believe me."

She shook her head. "That's not the point. The point is that Evan was part of the team, but now there's no place for him."

"We're in code freeze, Deborah. It's a temporary situation."

"The people you don't need—just like Maria Lomelli. There wasn't room for her, either."

"It's not at all the same thing, Deborah. Not at all."

Deborah plucked the rose and then pulled the petals off, one by one, discarding them on the sand. A breeze danced by, picked up the petals, and took them away.

"Maybe what you did was reasonable," she said. "It's just not reasonable for me."

"Deborah, you're overreacting. Remember that the newspaper article is slanted against me because that's what *sells*."

"The press came to me, too, Lucius."

"Oh?"

"They wanted to know if I thought it was possible that you deliberately scared Maria Lomelli in the Scape in order to keep her quiet."

Lucius snorted. "That's absurd. If she was scared, she scared herself."

Even in this dimming light, he could see Deborah's hazel eyes clearly. He looked into them. "What did you tell them?"

She looked down. "I told them I couldn't be sure."

The sky was filling with dark clouds.

"I wouldn't do that. She came to me. But—this isn't the place to have this discussion. Let's unlink and talk about it outside."

She stood up. "No. I've said what I have to say."

He stepped close to her. "The Scape is reflecting and reinforcing your mood—you know how this works. Don't make any decisions. Not here. Not like this."

It was getting so dark that he could barely see her.

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Lucius. You're just not the kind of man I want to love."

"We've hardly started, Deborah. Give us a chance."

"I'm sorry, Lucius."

"A chance."

"Lucius—"

"Please, just think about it. Will you do that?"

"All right," she said. "But don't expect me to change my mind. Don't hope, Lucius."

And then she was gone.

"Deborah?"

He sat down again.

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He could unlink and talk to her outside the Scape, where objects and landscape didn't change with every thought. But he knew how it would go: he would talk and she would listen silently. And then it would be worse because it was the real world, where there was no further appeal to objectivity.

He would do nothing. She would think about it, and then she would come back.

He listened to the hush of the waves, and looked at the dim sparkles of the ocean against a black sky. Now that Deborah was gone, the Scape would change back: the sky would lighten, the sea would turn blue, and gulls would cry overhead.

Lucius stared into the blackness and waited for dawn. ●

FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

LIKE AND AS

As I was saying the other day,
Like is like As in a certain way,
And likewise, necessarily,
I think it is quite plain to see
That As has a likeness to Like,
Much as Pat resembles Mike,
Although *grammatically* they are
Entirely dissimilar,
For Like links things like love and roses,
While the use of As supposes
Two processes have been compared,
Like gardening and having cared
For someone in a nursing home
By reading her some lovely poem
While she nods her head and sews.
So love is *like* a red, red rose,
And *as* the flowers need loving care,
So does the lady in the rocking chair.

—Tom Disch

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THE PRODIGY

Valerie J. Freireich

Valerie J. Freireich is a lawyer in private practice who lives in the suburbs of Chicago with her husband and their eight year old. The author's magazine sales include stories to *Aboriginal SF*, *Weird Tales*, *Pulphouse*, *F&SF*, and *Tomorrow*. "The Prodigy" is her first story for *Asimov's*.

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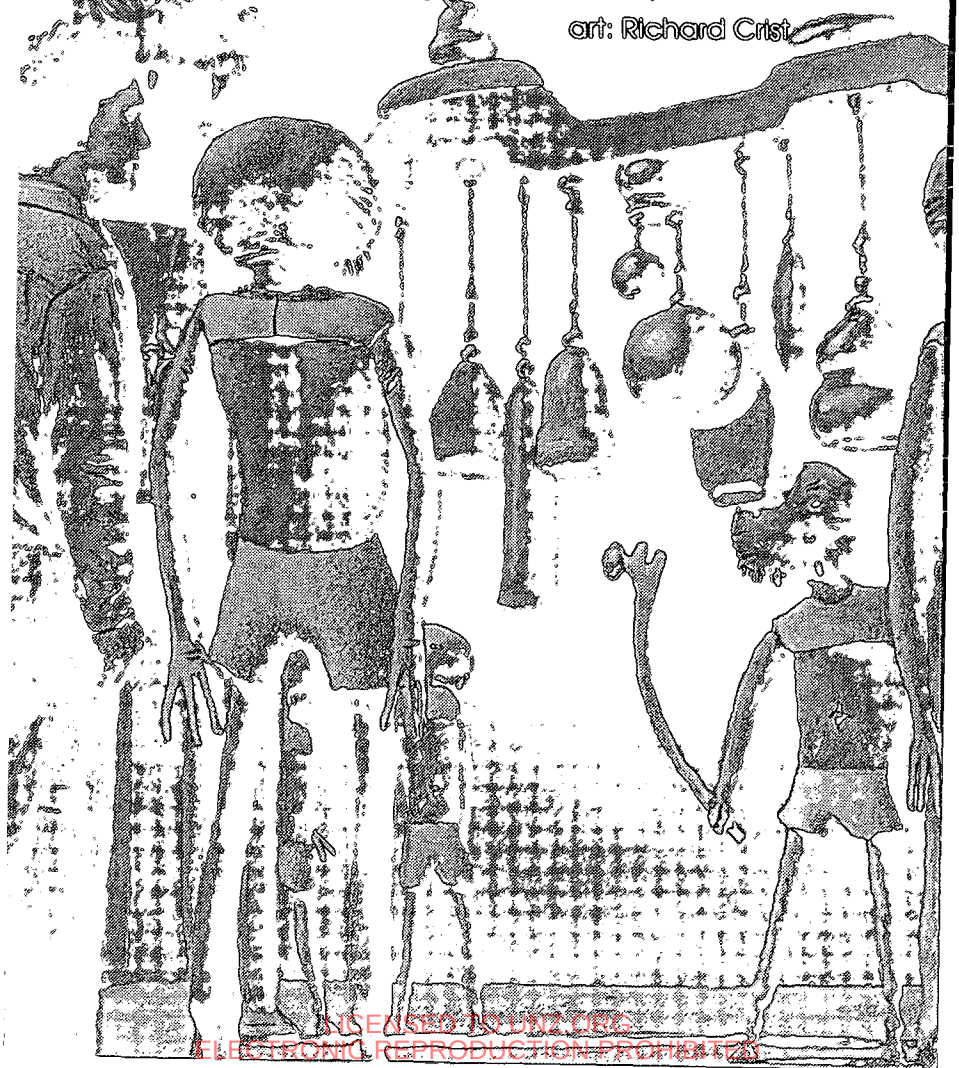

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John Cooper stared at the floral pattern on his china dinner plate, laboring to interpret it. Around the dining room, the clink of silverware produced music with a melody too complex to follow. He stopped eating, engrossed in listening, waiting for the meaning to coalesce.

Mariyo Emik leaned across the table and covered his pale hand with her own black one. "John? Are you feeling well?"

Her Fulani-accented English reached him as bursts of unintelligible syllables; he strained to understand, watching her dark eyes for clues to meaning. She squeezed his hand, then released it, waiting. Finally, he nodded. He was still clutching his fork, so he set it carefully at the edge of the plate, where it wouldn't obscure the painted flowers. "I'm fine. Just tired after a day of trying to understand alien engineering so I can interpret the Assholes."

"The Red-M," she corrected, but she looked down at her plate and grinned.

"What difference could it possibly make to aliens what we call them in our own language?" John concentrated on her face to avoid slipping back into the futile attempt to make sense of nonsense.

"I've never heard you call them names before."

"First time." He stared over her shoulder, considering. Human behavior held significance, too. With a shiver, he recognized *why* he needed to denigrate the Red-M aliens. He was afraid of them. He managed to smile, and said, "What *better* name is there for aliens who use the excretory end of their alimentary system to speak?"

"If *I* was nicknaming them," Mariyo said, leaning back, but observing John closely, "as a biologist I'd probably call them the 'Big Babies,' after their runaway neoteny. Imagine a lifetime as a child!" She frowned. "You look like you need a drink, John."

"Can't. Medication." He picked up the fork. Unable to prevent himself from noticing the similarity of its tines to a universal bar code, he wondered how a fork would scan. He tossed it down and pushed his plate away.

"John?" Mariyo sounded worried.

"Sorry. I'm too wide-open to stimuli to be good company. I need to rest. The progress I've been making interpreting the Red-M technical explanations of the FTL drive encourages me to take extra learning drugs, to keep the initiative going." The murmuring voices of the other members of Earth's drive acquisition team threatened to distract him with their human rhythm, a social heartbeat, but he forced himself to focus on Mariyo.

"You shouldn't do this to yourself." Her voice rose and trembled. She started to her feet.

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It was too much of an effort to answer. English—*all* human languages—seemed inadequate and clumsy. Instead, Cooper got up, turned around, fixed his attention on the door, and walked away. Several other specialists called to him as he passed, but he waved a hand in a gesture that warned them off without being impolite, or so he hoped. When he was on the drugs, seeing and learning patterns as easily as a child, knowing just what those who didn't use the drugs were able to understand was difficult.

The silence in the empty corridor was refreshing, but as he crossed the open yard separating the public rooms from the human quarters, he heard Red-M music being played in their portion of the compound: loud bell-ringing which, despite its rapid tempo, somehow managed to sound like a funeral. The crisp, cool evening air of Tuxtla Gutierrez was a good accompaniment to the sound that transformed the mountains of Mexico into an alien place. Cooper listened, satisfied that he recognized the tune as a variation on one Edin had played for him, called "Learning this World." He smiled, heartened by his successful interpretation.

The doctors said that the experimental drugs he was using put him in a state that was akin to a second childhood, opening him to new associations, returning his already considerable linguistic skills to the high learning-levels of childhood, when language was *instinctively* grasped. They had warned him of the side effects of overuse. Navel-gazing, they called it, the tendency to examine trivia for significance, to see codes and patterns in random phenomena where there *were* no patterns. It made him poor company for humans, but it was essential for interaction with the Red-M. Cooper smiled. Red-M didn't sing. Impulsively, he decided to introduce lyrics to the Red-M tune. He hurried across the compound toward the clanging sound of alien music.

"Coop-per," Edin said, enunciating too distinctly. An odor wafted from her, slightly sour, that Cooper had learned to associate with Red-M satisfaction.

He bowed. "I came to listen to your music, and, if you are willing to hear mine, then I'll sing." The entire room was eavesdropping; the music had paused when he entered.

"Good, Coop-per." She used English, some of which she had picked up during the hours spent listening to his translations, just as a child would have learned it, though a human interpreter was still necessary because the relatively cruder Red-M vocal apparatus was inadequate for many human sounds.

He bowed again, since use of English was generally a compliment. Edin said "Move" to her nearest neighbor, a much larger—and therefore

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older—Red-M named Hein, and he shrugged over to make room for Cooper on the standing line that was a Red-M audience.

Cooper imagined the absurd tableau, a human lined up among musically inclined Red-M, whose faces were like those of walruses, with thick, loose skin hanging in creases, flat noses, small, beady brown eyes, whiskers, and two short, gray tusks. They didn't smile, they didn't laugh, and when they spoke, their mouths didn't move. Red-M voices originated in an organ associated with their anus, located midway down their bodies and oriented in the same direction as the sensory organs of the face. Once Edin had told him that sound was expelled, not eaten.

A rather small Red-M, only about chest high on Cooper, was in the open center space. She began ringing the bell array in a pattern Cooper hadn't previously heard. "What is it today?" he whispered to Edin. Red-M music was a formal code, almost language.

"Physics," she replied.

He hesitated. Were Red-M meanings really so obscure, even while he was high on the drugs, or was she joking? "This music is nothing like (human) physics," he said carefully, using the informal word for his species frequently employed by the Red-M, though the precise meaning and connotations of it were unclear.

"(Human) physics!" Hein said, in explosive good humor. "Tell me another joke!"

Listening to put-downs of human knowledge was an unpleasant but common component of Cooper's job. The aliens were less diplomatic, too, outside of formal meetings. "We are very grateful for the (star drive) you are selling us," Cooper said, with a conciliatory alien gesture in the direction of his crotch.

"Even the (star drive) may be too much for (humans) to manage! You, Coop-per, are not too (human), but even *you* do not hear the (personal name?) Constant in the bells, do you? What did you intend to sing, then? (Human) physics?" The contempt was clear in Hein's tone.

His face burning with anger and extreme embarrassment, Cooper said, "I do not know the (he repeated the sound Hein had used) Constant, but I know music. Native-of-Earth music is much superior to this! More various and symmetrical."

"Empty sounds, with banal patterns and no meaning. Hollow noise, such as an animal makes." Hein was calm, condescendingly tolerant.

"Perhaps you do not understand humans!" Cooper moved a step away from Hein.

Edin put out her hand, not quite touching Cooper, but in a restraining gesture. "Coop-per is *not* (human)," she said to Hein. "He is rightly angered by your attitude. With proper education, he could be as reasonable as I am."

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"It's true that the natives-of-Earth are improving some of themselves with these drugs. A little. Someday they may no longer be so (human), but the day when they are our equals won't ever occur. It is impossible; their physiology limits them."

Perhaps it was the usual Red-M arrogance, but Cooper felt a chill creep over him as the Red-M words assumed more complete meanings. "The (star drive) is for (humans)?" he asked Hein.

"Of course."

"Because natives-of-Earth are (humans)?"

"So you will not hurt yourselves," Edin interjected.

"Or others," Hein added.

"The (star drive)?" Cooper spoke the word as the Red-M meant it, glancing around the room, staring at the walrus faces, one after another.

"Coop-per," Edin said. Her mouth didn't move. The impassive face was a terrifying mask. He saw the pattern; he had learned *this* lesson. He rushed out of the room.

Mariyo came to him late that night. Cooper was finally asleep, but she let herself in with the key he'd given her, and then slid naked into his bed. Disoriented, he whispered, "Lee?"

"Who's that?" She tickled him and wouldn't stop until he defended himself and sat up, straining to see her against the darkness.

"I thought you'd be angry at me for leaving dinner," he said.

"Worried." Her hand touched his bare arm, warming it. "When you're on those drugs, you seem almost as alien as the Red-M, and you're high most of the time, lately."

Her dark face was lost in shadows and he couldn't see her expression. "You think I'm addicted."

"Maybe not physically, but those drugs make the world seem exciting and new. That sensation might be difficult to give up. You're fluent in their language, the best interpreter on the project. Why not stop using the drugs?"

Cooper's gut twisted. Without the drugs, he was no better than any other (human). "I'm not fluent. The grammar is completely unnatural, and I probably have the vocabulary of an eight-year-old Red-M. If that."

He sensed her looking at him in the dark. "I'm *fine*, Mariyo. Really. I know what I'm doing."

"Who's Lee?" she asked in an easier, teasing tone, changing the subject. "Another woman?"

"My brother. He used to climb into bed with me when he was frightened."

She moved closer. The violet fragrance of her skin surrounded him.

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Every breath increased his awareness of her. "I didn't know you had a younger brother," she said.

He turned away. "I don't. Lee is five years older."

"Older?" She giggled. "What's he like *now?*"

"He's still retarded. 'Exceptional,' they call it in the U.S."

She seemed to freeze in place. "I'm sorry, John."

"I once asked if they could use these drugs on him, but they said no." It was effortless to talk into the darkness, as if he was speaking to himself, and it was even all right to know that Mariyo was the one listening. "He's not so bad, they always told my parents. He does all right, except that there are some things he'll never understand."

"Where is he?"

"He lives with my father and sister in Urbana, and has a job in a sheltered factory."

"Ah. There was a boy like that in my village. It was no problem there, because he was strong, he could work. It didn't matter if his mind was slow." She put her arms around him, her full breasts pressing against his side, and kissed his ear. "Abstract intelligence isn't the *only* quality that's important in a man."

He hugged her, more grateful for the attempted comfort than aroused, but rejecting that comfort nonetheless. An image of Edin's mask face robbed him of the ability to dismiss his brother's mental handicap so easily. "*Homo sapiens sapiens,*" he said bitterly. "Of all the ways we could distinguish ourselves from animals, the one we choose is 'man the wise.' "

She laughed. "That's a *European* name and attitude, not necessarily one shared by all humans. You love your brother. I hear it in your voice. So what's wrong with his life?" She moved slightly back from him.

He reached for her, grabbing on to her upper arm. Her skin was soft, but there was hard muscle just beneath it. The fragrance of her body was rich and exciting. "I need you, Mariyo." He drew her toward him across the rumpled sheets.

She sighed, slipping away once more. "Something's the matter. What is it?"

He leaned closer to her and tried to explain. "I finally grasped the meaning of the name the Red-M use for the star drive. Of course, I knew all along what they were referring to, so for convenience, in English I've been tagging it the 'FTL drive,' or the 'star drive,' like everyone else. Today I understood that the best translation of what the Red-M are *actually* saying is 'the dummy drive' or 'the fabulous flimflam drive.' "

Her eyes widened, all he could see of her in the dark. "Do you mean the star drive is a *fake?*"

"No. It works. But it's not quite what it seems. It's designed to function,

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but to protect those who can't protect themselves. Like a bicycle with training wheels, or a plane flown by an automatic pilot. Something even *idiots* can't screw up."

"Then what's your point?"

Cooper cleared his throat, and said, "They're patronizing us. Mankind. They think we're stupid. Their slang for us is 'dummies.' 'Morons.' "

"They're several thousand years ahead of us technologically, John. Actually, they've been remarkably polite."

"They're *not* polite; they're arrogant and rude. They're protecting the *rest* of the universe from our stupidity by giving us a foolproof—in the true sense of the word—star drive because, like cunning children, we just might design an inept version for ourselves. The Red-M really *are* smarter than we are." It was a relief to say it, but even so, Cooper couldn't look at her as he spoke.

Mariyo shook her head; Cooper sensed the movement. "They're different," she said.

"We can't understand their physics. They learn throughout their lives at the rate of children. Their ideas are deeper, more complex than ours." Another pattern fell into place. "You're not surprised."

"How could a biologist not consider the implications of Red-M neoteny? The slow and incomplete maturation of humans as compared to the great apes is a major factor in human intelligence. The Red-M are just farther along the same spectrum. Their ancestors probably started out with less intelligence than ours, so their neoteny had to progress further to make them sufficiently intelligent to use that as an evolutionary strategy." She leaned closer and began massaging his back. "You've been worrying about this, but you shouldn't. It is as it is."

"We should stop negotiations for their 'fabulous flimflam drive.' They're undoubtedly cheating us. The Earth flora and fauna samples your group is collecting for them are probably a lot more valuable than the drive."

She laughed and squeezed his shoulder. "Pick up our toys and go home because the universe doesn't play fair?"

He closed his eyes. "I'm considering quitting the drive-acquisition team. I don't like being second best."

Her voice was harsh and unsympathetic. "What's your alternative? To pretend? To bury your head in the sand?"

The silence stretched between them. "One way or another, I'm leaving tomorrow," John said. Then he added softly, "Will you come home with me?"

Tall, green cornstalks, their tassels waving in the wind, stretched as far as Cooper could see beyond the airport fence. Beneath the jet-fuel

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odor and the stink of car exhaust, there was a fertile scent of life and growth. He turned to Mariyo and said, "If people can admire the ocean, which is just water and waves, then they should see the same beauty in the plains."

She put her arm through his. "Don't sound so defensive. I like your home. I just wish I understood why you decided to visit your family now."

He shrugged, wondering if it *had* been a good idea, suspecting that Mariyo had been instrumental in the prompt granting of his temporary leave, and hers. "There's Jane," Cooper said, pointing as a white van pulled into the lot. He waved.

"Your sister," Mariyo said, glancing at him to confirm her information.

"Yes." The van sped up to them as though it wasn't going to stop, then screeched to a halt. Jane jumped out and rushed around the vehicle, opening the sliding door for them as Cooper awkwardly tried to hand her the box of frozen chocolate candy he'd purchased in the airport lobby. "Sorry for the short notice," he said.

"No problem." She glanced pointedly at Mariyo, a frosty glance, then responded too effusively to Cooper's formal introduction. Jane insisted that Cooper and Mariyo sit together in the middle seat of the van, leaving her alone in the front, looking, so Cooper thought guiltily, like his chauffeur.

"How're Dad and Lee?" he asked, draping his arm around Mariyo.

"Fine," Jane said. "They're waiting at home." She was eyeing Mariyo in the driver's mirror. "Do you come from a big family, Mary?"

"Mariyo," Cooper corrected her.

"It doesn't matter." Mariyo showed the extent of her discomfort by the expanse of teeth in her smile. "And no, I am the only child. If I wasn't, a daughter certainly would not have gotten so much education!" Cooper pulled her closer.

"I know what you mean," Jane said, glancing at Cooper in the mirror. "There were three of us, Lee, then me, and then John, the baby. Only John got much education. Lee, of course, went to special schools, and I was too busy taking care of everyone else, since our mother died when I was fifteen—John was thirteen—and I suppose I'm too stupid anyway, not like John." She glanced back over her shoulder at him; not five minutes together, and already she was back to her usual games.

"It was all scholarships," Cooper said. "It didn't take anything away from you."

"He was such a prodigy, Mary. I mean, Mariyo. Everyone was impressed with him. This is a college town, so there were lots of foreigners, and he snapped up their languages like they were stray dogs and he was the pound." She looked over her shoulder at them. "That's what one of his teachers said."

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Cooper stared out the window on the far side of Mariyo.

"It's been quite a while since you've been home," Jane said. "What? A year? More? Too busy talking with those aliens to bother with your family; I guess. But we're proud of you; Dad talks about you all the time. His son, the linguist."

"I'm not a linguist." Cooper kept his tone free of annoyance, but after all these years, couldn't she for once get it *right*? "I'm an *interpreter*. I don't study language structure; I learn to speak languages and then translate them."

"Whatever. Too bad you can't even spend the night—just in and out like a . . . a delivery man."

Cooper stared out the window, not responding, watching the buildings pass in a pattern of filled/open space that reminded him of a bar graph. He wondered what was being measured, feeling slow, feeling stupid. It was time for another dose, but he didn't want to take it in front of Mariyo, particularly since—not having to translate Red-M today—he had no excuse for it.

"Here we are," Jane said eventually, pulling the van into the driveway of a neat tract home Cooper had visited only once before, though his earnings had bought it. Lee was waiting for them in the front yard. He looked older than Cooper remembered, more mature, a handsome man, tall and fair, without the freckles that gave Cooper, at twenty-eight, an adolescent appearance, and without the vacant-eyed look that most people associated with mental retardation. He smiled often and guilelessly, and he smiled just that way as Mariyo was introduced.

"Let's go inside," Jane said when the greetings became a bit prolonged. "I made a big dinner for John—you didn't touch anything, did you, Lee?"

Cooper was grateful for Mariyo, whose presence inhibited the usual personal attacks by Jane, and who kept the conversation alive, answering Jane's questions about her home, and asking her own questions about the North American Midwest. Jane's heavy, overcooked dinner occupied the afternoon: setting the table, eating, and cleaning up. Cooper watched his father—his cardigan sweater was loose on him, the wrists that extended from it were thin, and his fingers were bony and gnarled, but his white hair was thick and his eyes still were lively. His father nodded at him, clearly enjoying every detail about the Red-M that Cooper passed on; as well as Mariyo's information about the cataloging and gathering of Earth's biota, although he rarely addressed her directly. Lee smiled at everyone, listening with equal attention to whatever was being said. After dinner, while the women were clearing the table, Lee asked Cooper to take a walk.

Cooper turned hesitantly to Mariyo, who was carrying a gravy boat

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into the kitchen. Jane had insisted on her help, after refusing Cooper's offer.

"Go on," Mariyo said. She put the dish down. "We'll have to leave soon. This will be your only chance to have time with your brother."

Cooper shrugged, then wondered if it looked like he didn't want to be alone with Lee. He grinned, feeling like a fraud or a fool, and said, too heartily, "Okay, let's go walk off some of Jane's food." His father's attention was like a spotlight on him. "Dad?"

"Go on. Evenings are too chilly for an old man like me."

Cooper made the obligatory protests, but Lee nodded and said, "It's already getting dark." They set off together like conspirators, while Jane was busy in the kitchen.

Once outdoors, Cooper hesitated on the front stoop; without a destination, there was no direction more appealing than any other. There was a park, Lee volunteered, so they struck off in that direction. Cooper breathed deeply, the crisp air awakening his mind nearly as well as would the drugs he longed to take.

"Mariyo is nice," Lee said.

"Jane doesn't like her; neither does Dad." Cooper regretted his words as soon as they'd been spoken, and, as he had feared, Lee frowned tragically.

"Why not?"

"She's different. People don't usually like someone who's different."

"You do. You like them best."

Cooper looked at his older brother. "Whom do *you* like?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"People who teach me something," Lee said with a child's seriousness.

Midwestern haze had relegated the sunset to an orange shimmer in the western sky. Some boys passed them, riding bicycles. A neighbor mowing his lawn waved at Lee and glanced curiously at Cooper. The smell of the fresh-cut grass reminded Cooper of childhood, when mowing had been his job.

"You taught me to cut the grass," Lee said, his thoughts startlingly parallel to his brother's.

"I was lazy, not kind. Anyway, Dad wouldn't let you do it." He remembered the argument, a bad one, with Jane accusing him of not caring for Lee and his father calling him selfish and inconsiderate of Lee's limitations.

Lee sang a few bars of *Alouette*. "You taught me that."

"Everyone knows it."

"*Je m' appelle Lee Cooper,*" Lee said. "You taught me a lot of things. You were always my best teacher." His voice was earnest. "I have a secret, Johnny. I've been saving my money up—that isn't the secret. The secret is that I want to buy a car. Then I won't have to ask Jane to take

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me everywhere. I know you're very busy—Dad says so—but would you teach me how to drive?"

Cooper stopped walking. Lee watched him, looked deceptively clever. There had even been times when he fooled people into thinking he was normal, people who expected a retarded man to show a more visible impairment.

"It's bad news, isn't it?" Lee gritted his teeth and nodded. "That's okay, Johnny. I know I can't do everything."

Cooper recognized the statement as one of the usual platitudes given to the handicapped; he'd always hated them. "I'm sorry, Lee. *I* think you could drive a car, but the government doesn't. They wouldn't give you a license." They continued walking, in silence, until Cooper asked, "Does it make you angry that most people are smarter than you?"

Lee shrugged. "You told me that there is always someone smarter than you are. I was crying, about the mowing, I think, and you said that there was someone smarter than *everyone,* except for God, because He is the smartest."

But Cooper had never really believed it about *himself.* A prodigy, Jane had said, and that was right. On the few occasions when someone had surpassed John Cooper, there had always been an excuse that made the incident irrelevant. "Anyway," Cooper said, as if Lee was debating the point with him, "is being smart the most important thing? What about being good?"

"I don't know." Lee looked confused. "They let mean people drive."

Cooper smiled. "Sure, look at Jane!"

They had reached the park, a small one, but with an outer-space theme. The slide was designed to look like a booster rocket. It had a faded "U.S.A." insignia. The infant swings were shaped like satellites, and the steel picnic tables had control pads painted on them.

Lee pulled back slightly, studying Cooper. "Why are you so sad?"

They looked at each other. Cooper searched his brother's eyes and found nothing missing. "I found out that I'm not as smart as I used to think I was," he said. "I take drugs so I'll learn better, and because I hate being stupid, but they're still not enough to make me as good as the Red-M, the aliens. They're still smarter than me—smarter than anyone. Smarter than anyone will ever be. Knowing that they're smarter, knowing that we can't catch them, cuts the heart out of everything we do."

There had been times when, despite the gulf in their abilities, Lee had been the comforting big brother. This time he only stared, open mouthed, at Cooper.

Cooper smiled sadly. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect an answer." But, foolishly, he had hoped for one.

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"I hate it, too," Lee said suddenly. "I can't do what I want. I keep trying, and I never win!"

"I know." Cooper nodded his head, then saw the distress in his brother's expression. "I'm sorry, Lee, really." His brother understood enough to have the same desires as any man and to know that he'd never be able to realize them. It was an appalling cruelty, one Cooper had always avoided fully acknowledging, instead, perhaps too many times, feeding Lee's hopes.

"Maybe I could learn to ride a motorcycle?" Lee asked. "It's smaller." He waited for an answer, prepared to be refused, but still hoping.

Cooper stared, realizing the courage behind Lee's persistence. "I love you, Lee. I swear, next summer I'll take a month off. We'll go somewhere, just the two of us, and I'll teach you to drive a car. To hell with them!"

They started walking back. The houses threw long shadows halfway across the road. Fireflies blinked their cold lights on and off in a code a mere human couldn't comprehend. In the last, ruddy glow of the sun, the very air seemed to sparkle. Crickets, or some other high-pitched night sounds, tried to gain Cooper's attention. He shook his head. Without the drugs coursing through his system, the wind didn't whisper indecipherable messages and the smells had no meaning other than the fact that it was fall. The pattern of the leaves on the ground was only random. He felt more at peace than he had in a long time. Then he realized that his brother was crying. He stopped. "Lee?"

"Will I hurt anyone if I drive?" Lee asked, tears trickling down his cheeks.

"We'll be careful."

"I don't want to hurt anyone!"

"You won't. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

"Not anybody *else,* either? I don't want to drive if I could hurt some little kid."

He hugged his brother. Lee was a bit shorter, slightly more muscular, solid. "You're my brother, Lee, my best friend, and God, I'm proud of you." It was true; there was no one closer to his heart.

"Really, Johnny?"

"Really and truly."

They stared, both slightly embarrassed. "We'd better get back," Cooper said, starting forward. Lee Cooper had dignity, he had courage and persistence, but what made him worthy of respect, despite his lack of normal intelligence, was that he was an *adult.* He had a sense of responsibility for others, even to the extent of protecting them from his own limitations. "Did it bother you when kids called you names?" Lee had never cried.

"A little." Lee smiled and shrugged. "But you said names meant more about how other people thought, then about what was real. Remember?"

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Cooper shook his head, though it sounded like one of the quasi-anthropological theories he might have expounded from time to time to his brother. "No, but that's true."

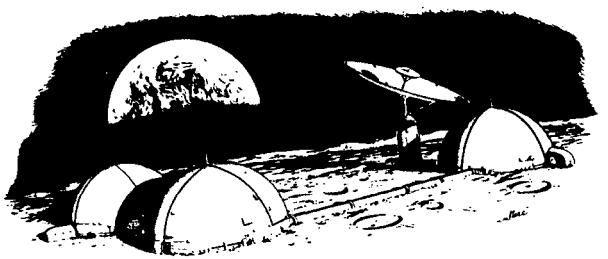
"So what they said wasn't real; they were just kids and didn't know any better."

"You're right," Cooper said. "What difference does it make what kids say?" Maybe the fabulous flimflam drive was necessary. It was a wrenching thought, but if the training wheels to the universe were ever to come off, then it would only happen if mankind convinced others, including the Red-M, that there were advantages to maturity, that intelligence accompanied by responsibility was as desirable as a large quantity of pure intelligence itself. Cooper felt in his pocket and drew out his vial of pills, the patterning drugs, then tossed the vial into the air and caught it.

"What's that?" Lee asked.

"A tool. The pills I use to learn to interpret the Red-M better. I just realized why you don't need them, Lee. They aren't anything that can make a man *wise*." He returned the vial to his pocket.

Lee smiled, vaguely, and the two brothers walked toward the house, their intermingled footsteps making a coded rhythm in the evening stillness, one Cooper finally understood. ●



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CURSE OF THE TELEPATH'S WIFE

Her feminine wiles are useless.
There is no way to surprise him.
Her slightest thought of infidelity
she must wear as brand of infidelity.
She is forever moving across a stage

beneath the klieg light of his mind,
all of her actions, her every word,
foreseen as if they had been scripted.
Even her dreams are no longer her own.
She awakens in the depth of the night

to find him poised motionless above her,
eyes afire, silent breath upon her brow,
and she knows he has been tramping
the landscape of her deepest imagination,
exploring the secrets of her unconscious

far more thoroughly than any therapist,
recording a world he will later relate
to her with intimate and obscene detail,
a nightmare world of surreal scenarios
and illicit deeds she only half believes.

Her thoughts are so completely tied to his
that the self she once knew has faded from
her memory like an inconsequential affair,
like some abandoned lover's face stripped
featureless and bland by the passing years.

Only in those seldom hours when he sleeps
and she remains awake can she attempt to
rediscover some portion of her identity,
to reclaim a kind of temporary solo sanity
and begin to see herself as a person again.

But if this is sanity she has rediscovered,
she wonders why is she kneeling and sobbing
uncontrollably on their bed, a carving knife
rising and falling like a hammer in her hand,
its blade, its handle, slick and dripping red.

—Bruce Boston

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SOUTHPAW

Bruce McAllister

Bruce McAllister is the author of this issue's second baseball story. His most recent novel is *Dream Baby* (Tor 1989), and his short fiction appears regularly in *Omni* magazine and *Omni* books. Mr. McAllister directs the Professional Writing Program at the University of Redlands in Southern California, where he holds "one of those proverbial 'endowed chairs' in literature and writing."

art: Gary Freeman

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"Eventually New York Giants' scout Alex Pompez got the authorization from their front office to offer Castro a contact. After several days of deliberation with friends, family and some of his professors, Castro turned down the offer. The Giants' officials were stunned. "No one had ever turned us down from Latin America before," recalled Pompez. "Castro said no, but in his very polite way. He was really a very nice kid. . . ."

—J. David Truby, Sports History, *November 1988*

Fidel stands on the pitcher's mound, dazed. For an instant he doesn't know where he is. It *is* a pitcher's mound. It *is* a baseball diamond, and there is a woman—the woman he loves—out there in the stands with her beautiful blonde hair and her very American name waving to him, because she loves him, too. It is *July*. He is sure of this. It is '51 or '52. He cannot remember which. But the crowd is as big as ever and he can smell the leather of his glove, and he knows he is playing baseball—the way, as a child in the sugarcane fields of Oriente Province, he always dreamed he might.

His fastball is a problem, but he throws one anyway, it breaks wide and the ump calls the ball. He throws a curve this time, a *fine* one, and

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it's a strike—the third. He grins at Westrum, his catcher, his friend. The next batter's up. Fidel feels an itching on his face and reaches up to scratch it. It feels like the beginning of a beard, but that can't be. You keep a clean face in baseball. He tried to tell his father that, in Oriente, the last time he went home, but the old man, as always, had just argued.

He delivers another curve—with *great* control—and smiles when the ball drops off the table and Sterling swings like an idiot. He muscles up on the pitch, blows the batter down with a heater, but Williams gets a double off the next slider, Miller clears the bases with a triple, and they bring Wilhelm in to relieve him at last. The final score is 9 to 4, just like the oddsmakers predicted, and that great centerfielder Mays still won't look at him in the lockers.

Nancy—her name is Nancy—is waiting for him at the back entrance when he's in his street clothes again, the flowered shirt and the white ducks he likes best, and she looks wonderful. She's chewing gum, which drives him crazy, but her skin is like a dream—like moonlight on the Mulano—and he kisses her hard, feeling her tongue between his lips. When they pull away she says: "I really like the way you walked that Negro in the fifth."

He smiles at her. He loves her so much it hurts. She doesn't know a damn thing about the game and nothing about Cuba, but she's doing her best and she loves him too. "I do it for *you, chica.*" he tells her. "I *always* do it for you."

That night he dreams he's in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, at a place called La Playa. He has no idea why he's here. He's never dreamt this dream before. He's lying on the ground with a rifle in his hand. He's wearing the fatigues a soldier wears, and doesn't understand why—who the two men lying beside him are, what it means. The clothes he's wearing are rough. His face itches like hell.

When he wakes, she is beside him. The sheet has fallen away from her back, which is to him, and her ass—which is so beautiful, which any man would find beautiful—is there for him and him alone to see. *How can anything be more real than this? How can I be dreaming of such things?* He can hear a song fading but does not know it. There is a bay—a bay with Naval ships—and the song is fading away.

Guantanamera . . . the voice was singing.

Yo soy un hombre sincero, it sang.

I am a truthful man.

Why, Fidel wonders, was it singing this?

After the game with the Cardinals on Saturday, when he pitches six innings before they bring Wilhelm in to relieve him and end up a little

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better than the oddsmakers had it, a kid comes up to him and wants his autograph. The kid is dark, like the children he played with on the *finca* his father owns—the ones that worked with their families during the cane harvest and sat beside him in the country school at Marcana between harvests. He knows this boy is Cuban, too.

"*¿Señor?*" the kid asks, holding up a baseball card. "*¿Por favor?*"

Fidel doesn't understand. It is a baseball card, sure. But whose? He takes it and sees himself. No one has told him—no one has told him there is a card with his face on it, something else he has always dreamed of. He remembers now. He has been playing for the Giants—this is his first year. The offer was a good one, with a five thousand dollar bonus for signing. Now he's on a baseball card. He tries to read it, but the words are small, Nancy has his glasses and he must squint. The words fill him with awe.

It says nothing about his fastball, and he is grateful. He smiles at the boy, whose eyes are on him. The father hands him a pen. "What's your name, *hijo?*" he asks. "Raul," the boys says. "*Me llamo Raul.*" *To Raul,* he writes. He writes it across his own face because that is where the room is. It is harder than hell writing on a card this small and he must kneel down, writing it on his knee. *May your dreams come true,* he also writes, putting it across his jersey now. He wants to write *And may your*

FIDEL ALEJANDRO CASTRO RUZ

Pitcher: New York Giants Home: Queens, New York
Born: August 13, 1926, Biran, Cuba Eyes: Brown Hair: Brown
Ht.: 6' 2" Wt.: 190 Throws: Left Bats: Right

*** Fidel first attracted attention as the star of the University of Havana's baseball team. At Havana in '48 he had 16 wins, 5 losses, and a shutout and no-hitter to his credit. He is known for the great variety of his curveballs.**

MAJOR & MINOR LEAGUE PITCHING RECORDS

	G	IP	W	L	R	ER	SO	BB	ERA
'49 Roch.	20	127	7	5	62	58	102	43	4.11
'50 Roch.	35	260	14	9	115	101	182	63	3.50
Min. Lea Totals	55	387	21	14	177	159	284	106	3.69
'51 Giants	31	209	12	10	98	82	129	51	3.53
Maj. Lea. Totals	31	209	12	10	98	82	129	51	3.53

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fastball be better than mine, but there isn't any room. He gives the card back and returns the pen. The boy thanks him. The father nods, grinning. Fidel grins back. "*Muy guapo*," Fidel tells him. The man keeps nodding. "I mean it," Fidel says.

He dreams of a canefield near Allegria del Oio, to the north, of soldiers moving through the cane. He can't breathe. He is lying on the ground, he can't move, can't breathe. He's holding something in his hand—but what? None of it makes sense. There isn't any war in Cuba. Life in Cuba is peaceful, he knows. Fulgencio Batista, the President, is running it, and running it well. After Pirontes, how could he not? Relations with the United States are good. Who could possibly be hiding in the Sierra Maestra? Who could be lying in the cane with rifles in their hands, hiding from soldiers and singing a song about a *truthful man?*

After they have made love, after she has asked him to take her from behind first, then from the front, where they can see each other, after they've reached their most beautiful moment together, he tells her about his dream and she says: "Dreams aren't suppose to make sense, honey."

He can't believe she is a waitress. He cannot, even for a moment, believe that anyone this beautiful, this American in so many ways, is only a waitress. He wants her to stop working. He would rather have her watch television all day in the apartment or shop for nice clothes for herself than walk around in such a dull uniform. But she's going to keep working, she tells him, until he gets his new contract. She *wants* to, she says.

He doesn't have the heart to tell her that he is probably not going to be renewed, that he's probably going to be sent back to work on his strength, which has been getting worse, not better, and how once you go back down it is so very hard to return. Durocher, that crazy man, may love having him, a left-handed Cuban, on his team, may have brought him up just for that, but that just isn't enough now.

He loves her too much to scare her, and there's always a chance—isn't there?—that his fastball will get better, that his arm will become as strong as it needs to be.

All he really needs, he knows, is a break—like the one Koslo got in the Series, Durocher's surprise starter who got to go all the way in that first great game with the Yankees, when they really had them by the balls. His arm would feel the pride, would be strong from it, and maybe then Mays and Irvin would look at him in the fucking lockers.

Nancy loves the "I Love Lucy" television show. Because she does, on her birthday he buys her a new Zenith television set—a big one. One with an antenna big enough to make the picture better. Some day there

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will be television sets with *colored* pictures—everyone says so—and he knows he'll buy her one of those too when the stores have them. On her days off she watches the show, and every chance he gets he watches it with her. She tells him: "I wish I had red hair like Lucy. Would you like that?" He looks at the black-and-white picture on the television set and does his best to imagine Lucy's hair *in color*. *Sure*, he thinks. *Red hair is amazing. But so is blonde.* "If you want," he says, "but I like your blonde hair, *chica*. You look like an angel to me. You fill this room with light—just like an angel." He wants to sound like a poet; he has always wanted to sound like a poet. He wants never to lose the magic of their lives, and this is possible in America, is it not? Not to lose what you have, what you have dreamed of? If she wants red hair, okay, but not if it's because she thinks she isn't beautiful without it. "You're beautiful, *chica*. You're the most beautiful woman I have ever known," he tells her, and then a face—a woman with dark hair, in the ugly green fatigues a soldier wears—comes to him. He doesn't know her. He doesn't know why this face has come to him, when he is with the woman he loves.

He closes his eyes and the face, like the song, fades.

They watch "I Love Lucy" and "Your Show of Shows" and "You Bet Your Life" and the next week, too—like a date, there in their own living room on the big Zenith he has bought for her birthday—they watch Lucy and her best friend Ethel work on Lucy's crazy plans to get what she wants out of life. They laugh at all the trouble Lucy gets herself into only because she wants to be taken seriously, and also wants to be a good wife. *Is this the struggle of all American women?* he wonders. To be taken seriously, but to be a good wife too?

Nancy isn't laughing, and he knows that look. She isn't happy. Like Lucy, she wants something but isn't sure she can have it. She still wants that *red hair*, he knows. She wants red hair the same way he has always wanted to play pro ball, because in America all things are possible, and so you dream about them, and you aren't happy unless you get them. The tenderness he feels for her suddenly brings tears to his eyes, and he hides them by looking away.

Now she is laughing. She has lost herself again in the television show. She is watching Lucy do her crazy things while Ricky, that amazing drummer—that Cuban dancer all American women are in love with—doesn't know what she's up to, though when he finds out he will indeed forgive her, because he loves her. This is American too, Fidel knows.

The Cuban phones him three days later. The man says only, "I would like the opportunity to meet with you, *Señor*. Would this be possible?" When Fidel asks what it is about, the man says, "Our country." "Cuba?"

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Fidel asks. "Yes," the man tells him. "I ask only for an hour of your time —at the very most." Fidel feels an uneasiness begin, but says, "Yes." *Why not?* This man is a fellow Cuban, another son of Cuba and Martí, so why should he not? If there is something happening in Cuba that he should know about, what is an hour of his time?

They meet at the coffee shop where Nancy works. Nancy serves them and smiles at them both. The man begins to talk. He is not direct. He talks of many things, but not important ones. The uneasiness grows. What is wrong? What is so wrong in Cuba that a man contacts him like this, talks around things and does not get to the point? "What are you trying to say?" Fidel says.

"Things are happening now," the man says.

"What things?"

"People are not happy, *Señor.*"

"What people?"

"The farmers and workers," the man says, and Fidel understands at last.

"You are a *communist,*" he says to the man.

"No. I am not," the man answers. "I am a son of Cuba, like you. I am simply *concerned.* And I happen to represent others who are concerned, others who feel that you, a son of Cuba—a celebrity in both countries—might wish to know about these things, to consider them."

"I am a baseball player," Fidel says at last. "I know nothing of politics. We have a president in Cuba and a president in the United States. Except for an American war in Asia, I am not aware of any problems."

The man is quiet for a moment. "Yes," he says, "you are in America now, and you are playing baseball, and so you might not be in a position to hear about things at home, would you agree?"

That is true, Fidel thinks. *A baseball player would not, would he. . . .*

"There is a movement in Oriente Province, your own province," the man tells him, "a movement that is growing. The current administration in Havana is not happy with it, but I must emphasize to you that it is a movement *of the sons of Cuba,* men who are tired of the manner in which Cuba remains a child in the shadow of North America—a child not allowed to grow up, to know what it is like to be a man, to build a life from hard work, to have a family, to feel the pride a *man* should feel. . . ."

The man is looking at him, and Fidel looks away.

"The United States is a good country," Fidel says.

"Yes, I know. It has been good to Cubans like you, *Señor.* But, if you will forgive me, it has not been as good to everyone. Those who work on the *fincas,* in the cities, those who work for a few *kilos* a day to serve the wealthy tourists who come to Havana to play. . . ."

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He knows what the man is saying. He knows he is lucky. He remembers the boys and girls from the canefields and knows where they are now. They do not play on baseball fields in New York. They do not play on tennis courts in California. They do not run hotels in Miami. And only a few will ever have careers in boxing. He knows what the man is saying, and he feels the shame.

He sighs at last. "What is the United States doing that is so wrong? Please, I would like to know. . . . "

When the man is gone, Fidel sits for a while in the booth with its red upholstery. Nancy comes to give him the check, to smile at him and to purse her lips in a kiss in his direction, so that he will do the same. When he does not, she frowns just like Lucy—as if to say *What's wrong, Ricky?* He gives her what smile he can, so that she will not think he no longer loves her.

He hasn't felt this way since he was a child, he realizes, as he walks from the coffee shop to the blue Chevrolet in the parking lot—since the days he would argue with his father at home and his father would shout, not wanting to hear what he had to say. His father, with that wonderful beard of his, had come from Spain, the poorest part, had begun his life as a soldier sent to fight in Cuba, had become a brickmaster who bought a little land here and there, until eventually he was a *land owner,* a man of the *finca,* a man who had made a life for himself out of *nothing,* who did not want to hear about the poor children his son played with. And why should he? *You should not be playing with them!* his father would shout.

No son wants his father angry with him, Fidel knows.

Even the thought of *love*—even the thought of love of a woman like Nancy, or a fine baseball card with his picture on it—cannot make the feelings go away as he drives toward the Polo Grounds and the doubleheader.

That night he dreams that someone—he himself or someone else—has set fire to his father's cane fields. He wakes from the dream in a sweat. And yet his father was *there*—in the dream. Standing beside the flames and nodding, as if everything were okay, as if he had given his permission. When he falls asleep again, he dreams of a prison on an island of pine trees, a ship that almost sinks, of soldiers asleep (or *dead*) lying beside him under the *paja* of dried cane leaves.

After the game with Brooklyn on Sunday, when he pitches six innings before they call in Hutchinson, he doesn't take Nancy out for black beans or steak. She isn't angry. He goes to bed early. He dreams of the moun-

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tains again, and then, right before he wakes, of that same ship, the one full of the soldiers he knew . . . before they died.

It takes him three weeks to get through to Desi Arnaz. He tries calling the studio where the show is filmed, and then the company that makes the show. He writes two letters, certain that neither will get through. When he sends a telegram, it says simply, "A fellow son of Cuba would like to meet with you."

The answer takes four weeks. Arnaz, who lives in a valley north of Hollywood, California, will meet with him if he can be in Los Angeles on the 13th of September at ten in the morning. A driver will be sent to his hotel.

Nancy wants to go, and for a moment he almost says *yes*. Yet he knows what it will be like: He, full of feelings he hasn't felt in so long, needing to talk to a fellow son of Cuba; she, wanting to have fun in the city she has always dreamed of. It would be worse to take her with him, would it not? Worse than telling her *no*? "But *why?*" she asks. She is hurt. He has made a dream come true for her for a moment—the chance to go to Hollywood, maybe even to meet Lucille Ball herself—only to take it away. What has she done? Her body sags, older, and he is afraid: *What am I doing? What am I doing to us*? Suddenly he is angry at the man for telling him about Cuba, for making him feel what he feels, for making him hurt the woman he loves. And for making him *afraid*. "*Señor* Arnaz is a busy man, *chica,*" he tells her gently. "His wife is a busy woman. I will be speaking to him for no more than an hour and then I will come home. It is *political* business. *Cuban* business. If I were going to Hollywood for fun, you would be the only one I would take. But I am not going for fun. I would not be able to have fun without you. Can you understand?"

She does not speak, and when she does, she says: *Maybe another time.* She says: *I understand.* This should make him happy, but it does not. Even this depresses him—that she *understands*, that she is willing to wait for something that may never come again. *Everything is falling apart*, he feels. *Everything is becoming* ***something else***—

A darkness.

The night before he leaves for Hollywood, he dreams he is high up in an airplane, looking down at an island. It is Cuba. Below him he can see things he does not understand. Below, in black and white—like photographs—are buildings, are trucks covered with palm fronds and bushes, things that look like long, thin bullets. He is holding something in his hand—a glove, a camera, a favorite rifle with a telescope on top—but he cannot see it. He is looking down.

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Everything is quiet. . . . as if the whole world were waiting.

The chauffeur sent by Arnaz takes him from the ancient hotel on Hollywood Boulevard to the valley, which is over the hills, to a gate, which the driver gets out and opens. At the end of a long driveway stands Lucy and Desi's house, which looks not unlike a *hacienda.* Arnaz is waiting in the hallway for him—with a smile and a manly handshake —and they sit down immediately in a bright white room full of windows and light. A servant brings them drinks—a rum for Fidel and a lemonade for Desi. Lucy does not appear. She is pregnant—everyone knows this—and besides, she is very involved in her Hollywood projects. She will not appear, he knows now. He will not even be able to ask her for an autograph to take back to Nancy.

But he can see the portrait of Lucy—that famous painting by that famous American painter—on the wall above them, in the light. *In color* her hair is indeed remarkable. "I have heard many great things about you, *Señor* Castro," Arnaz says suddenly. He is wearing gabardine slacks, is thinner than Fidel imagined. "I was the only boy in Cuba never to play baseball, I am certain, but I follow the sport avidly—especially when one of its players is a son of Cuba and boasts your gifts."

"*Muchas gracias,*" Fidel says. He is uncomfortable, sitting with the man he has seen so many times on television, and knows he should not be. They are both Cubans. They are both important men. "If I may say so, *Señor* Arnaz, you are the most famous Cuban in America and my girlfriend and I are but two of the many many fans you and your wife have in both countries. . . ."

It is not what he wanted to say. Arnaz smiles, saying nothing. He is waiting. He is waiting to hear the reason Fidel has come.

He has rehearsed this many times and yet the rehearsals mean nothing. It is like his fastball. All the practice in the world means nothing. He must simply find the courage to say what he has come to say:

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, *Señor.* I have asked for this meeting because I am concerned about our country. . . ."

He waits. The face of Arnaz does not change. The smile is there. The eyes look at him respectfully, just as the eyes of the Cuban in the coffee shop looked at him.

And then Arnaz says, "I see," and the smile changes.

Fidel is unable to breathe. All he can see is the frown, faint but there. All he can do, holding his breath, is wonder what it means: *Disappointment,* because Arnaz imagined something different—a Hollywood project, a *baseball* Hollywood project, an event for charity with baseball players and Hollywood people . . . for the poor of Cuba perhaps?

Or is it *anger?*

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"To what do you refer?" Arnaz asks, his voice different now. *I do not imagine this,* Fidel tells himself. *It is real. The warmth is gone. . . .*

Even the room looks darker now, Lucy's portrait on the wall dimmer. Fidel takes a breath, exhales, and begins again: "I cannot be sure of the details myself, *Señor.* That is why I wished to see you. Perhaps you know more than I." He takes another breath, exhales it too, and smells suddenly the cane fields of Oriente, their sweetness, and sweet rain. "We are both celebrities, *Señor* Arnaz—myself to a much lesser degree, to be sure—and I believe that celebrities like you and I hold unusual positions in our two countries. We are Cubans, yes, but we are not *ordinary* Cubans. We are famous in two countries and have the power, I believe, and even—if I may be so bold—the responsibility as well, to know what is happening in Cuba, to speak publicly, even to influence matters between those two countries . . . for the sake of the sons and daughters of Martí. . . ."

Arnaz waits.

"Have you," Fidel goes on quickly, "heard of a movement in Oriente Province, in the Sierra Maestra, or of any general unrest in our country, *Señor?* Word of such matters has reached me recently through a fellow Cuban whose credentials I have no reason to question and who I do *not* believe is a communist."

Arnaz looks at him and the silence goes on and on. When the little Cuban finally speaks, it is like wind through pine trees near a sea, like years of walls there. "Forgive me for what I am about to say, *Señor* Castro, but like many men in your profession, you are very naïve. You hear a rumor and from it imagine a *revolution.* You hear the name of José Martí invoked by those who would invoke any name to suit their purposes and from this suddenly imagine that it is your duty to become *involved.*

"It would hurt you seriously, *Señor* Castro," Arnaz continues, "were word of this concern of yours—of our meeting and your very words to me today—to become public. Were that to happen, I assure you, you would find yourself in an unfavorable public light, one that would have consequences for you professionally for many many years, for your family in Cuba, for your girlfriend here. I will not mention your visit to anyone. I trust you will do the same."

Arnaz is getting up. "I would also suggest, *Señor* Castro, that you leave matters of the kind you have been so concerned with to the politicians, to our presidents in Washington and Havana, who have wisdom in such things."

Fidel is nodding, rising too. He can feel the heat of the shame on his face. They are at the door. The chauffeur is standing by the limousine. Arnaz is telling him goodbye, wishing him good luck and a fine baseball

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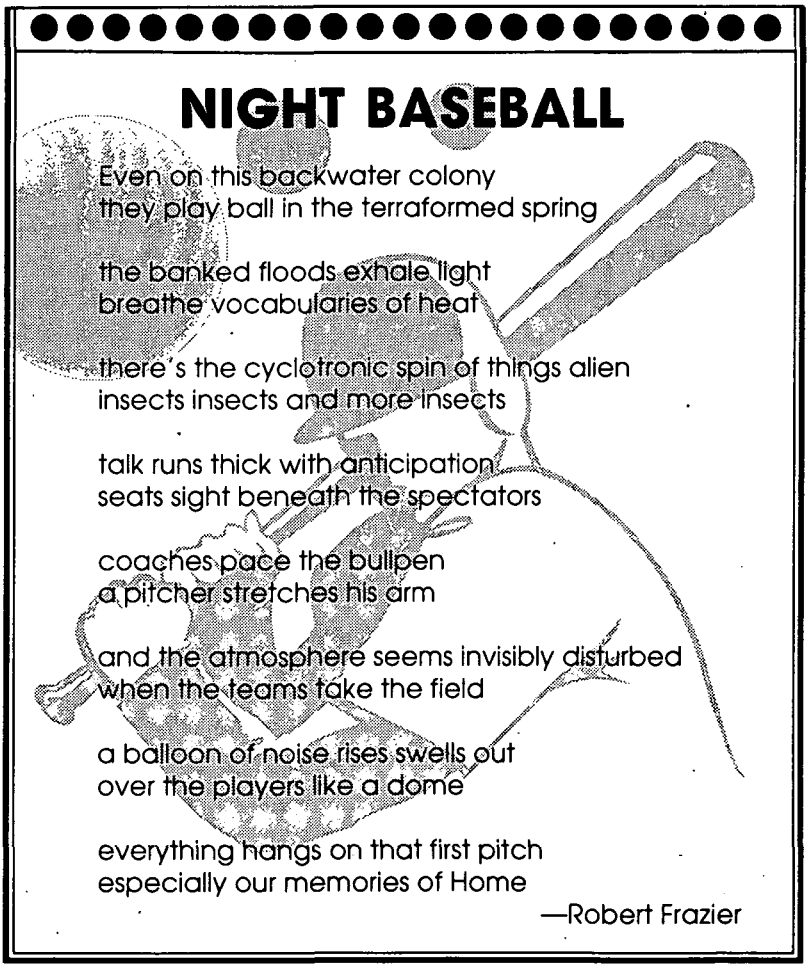
season. The gracious smile is there, the manly handshake somehow, and now the limousine is carrying him back down the driveway toward the gate.

The despair that fills him is vast, as vast as the uncleared forests beyond the sugarcane and tobacco fields of Oriente Province, lifting only when the limousine is free of the gate and he can think of Nancy again—her face, her hair—and can realize that, *yes*, she would look good with red hair, that indeed he would like her hair to be such an amazing red. ●



NIGHT BASEBALL

Even on this backwater colony
they play ball in the terraformed spring

the banked floods exhale light
breathe vocabularies of heat

there's the cyclotronic spin of things alien
insects insects and more insects

talk runs thick with anticipation
seats sight beneath the spectators

coaches pace the bullpen
a pitcher stretches his arm

and the atmosphere seems invisibly disturbed
when the teams take the field

a balloon of noise rises swells out
over the players like a dome

everything hangs on that first pitch
especially our memories of Home

—Robert Frazier

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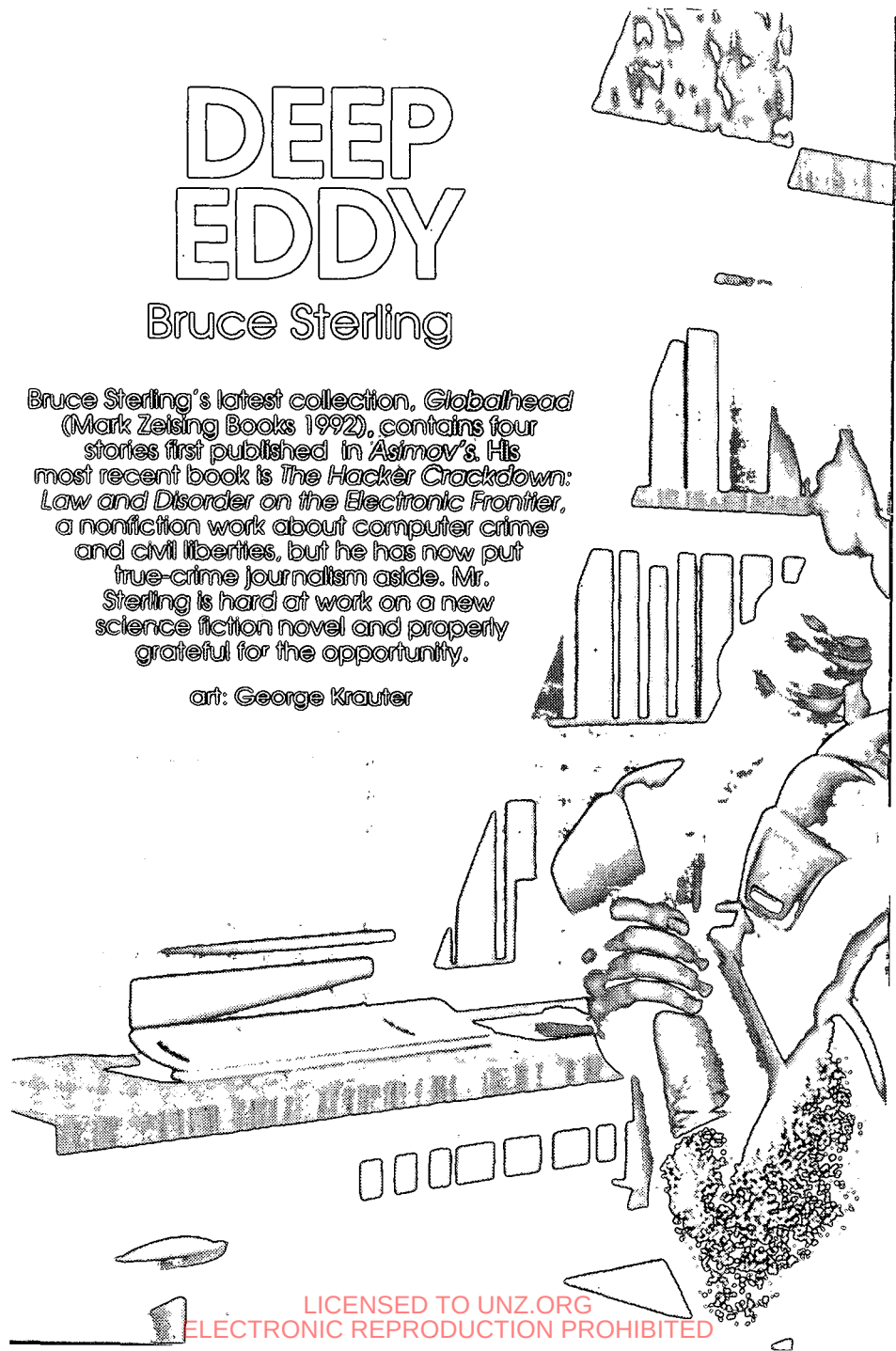
DEEP EDDY

Bruce Sterling

Bruce Sterling's latest collection, *Globalhead* (Mark Zeising Books 1992), contains four stories first published in *Asimov's*. His most recent book is *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier*, a nonfiction work about computer crime and civil liberties, but he has now put true-crime journalism aside. Mr. Sterling is hard at work on a new science fiction novel and properly grateful for the opportunity.

art: George Krauter



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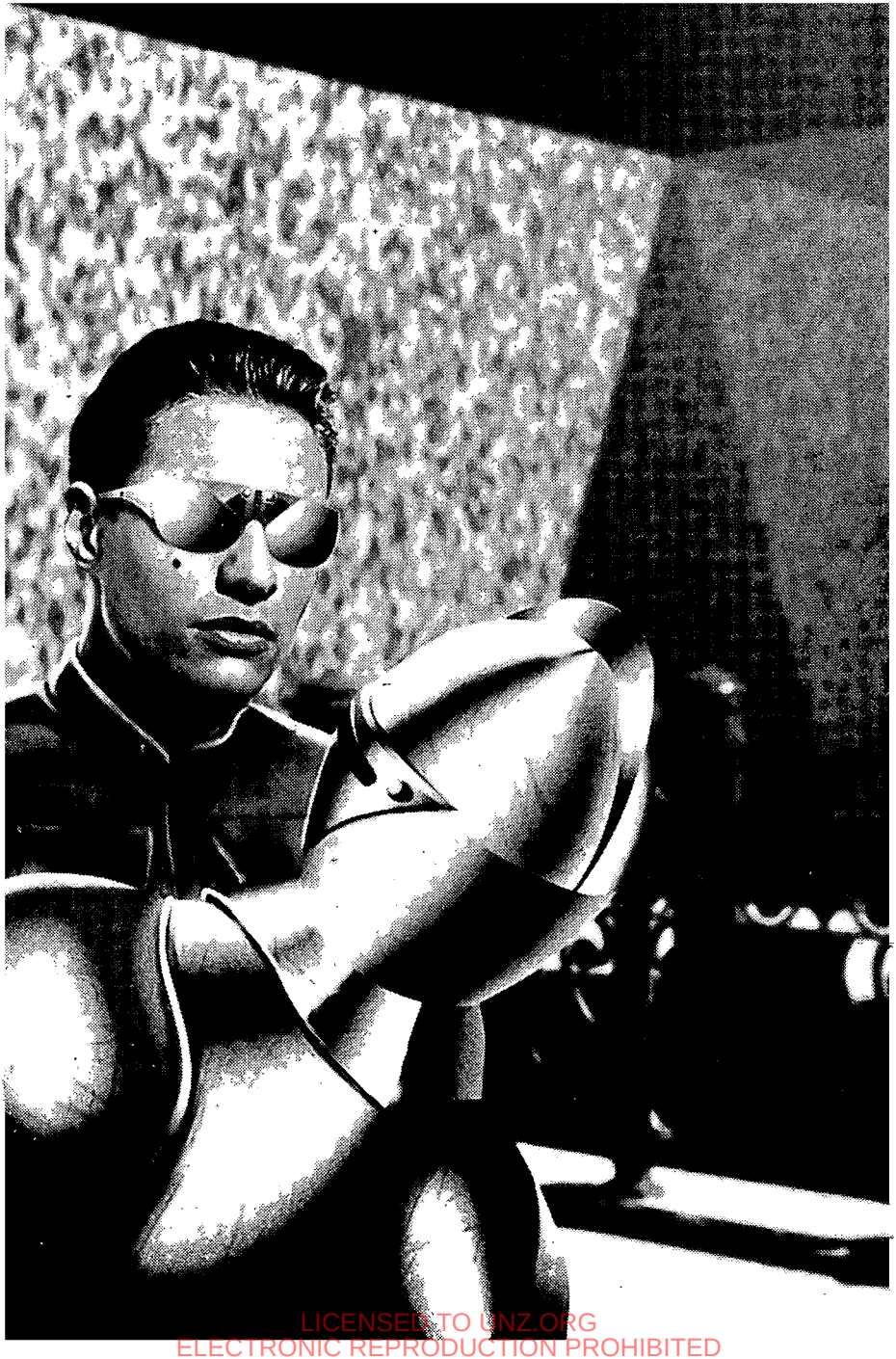

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The Continental gentleman in the next beanbag offered "Zigaretten?"

"What's in it?" Deep Eddy asked. The gray-haired gentleman murmured something: polysyllabic medical German. Eddy's translation program crashed at once.

Eddy gently declined. The gentleman shook a zigarette from the pack, twisted its tip, and huffed at it. A sharp perfume arose, like coffee struck by lightning.

The elderly European brightened swiftly. He flipped open a newspad, tapped through its menu, and began alertly scanning a German business zine.

Deep Eddy killed his translation program, switched spexware, and scanned the man. The gentleman was broadcasting a business bio. His name was Peter Liebling, he was from Bremen, he was ninety years old, he was an official with a European lumber firm. His hobbies were backgammon and collecting antique phone-cards. He looked pretty young for ninety. He probably had some unusual and interesting medical syndromes.

Herr Leibling glanced up, annoyed at Eddy's computer-assisted gaze. Eddy dropped his spex back onto their neck-chain. A practiced gesture, one Deep Eddy used a lot—*hey, didn't mean to stare, pal.* A lot of people were suspicious of spex. Most people had no idea of the profound capacities of spexware. Most people still didn't use spex. Most people were, in a word, losers.

Eddy lurched up within his baby-blue beanbag and gazed out the aircraft window. Chattanooga, Tennessee. Bright white ceramic air-control towers, distant wine-colored office blocks, and a million dark green trees. Tarmac heated gently in the summer morning. Eddy lifted his spex again to check a silent take-off westward by a white-and-red Asian jet. Infrared turbulence gushed from its distant engines. Deep Eddy loved infrared. That deep silent magical whirl of invisible heat, the breath of industry.

People underestimated Chattanooga, Deep Eddy thought with a local boy's pride. Chattanooga had a very high per-capita investment in spexware. In fact Chattanooga ranked third-highest in NAFTA. Number One was San Jose, California (naturally), and Number Two was Madison, Wisconsin.

Eddy had already traveled to both those rival cities, in the service of his Chattanooga users group, to swap some spexware, market a little info, and make a careful study of the local scene. To collect some competitive intelligence. To spy around, not to put too fine a point on it.

Eddy's most recent business trip had been five drunken days at a blowout All-NAFTA spexware conference in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. Eddy had not yet figured out why Ciudad Juarez, a once-dreary maquilladora factory town on the Rio Grande, had gone completely hog-wild for spexing. But even little kids there had spex, brightly speckly throwaway kid-stuff with just a couple dozen meg. There were tottering grannies with spex. Security cops with spex mounted right into their riot helmets. Billboards everywhere that couldn't be read without spex. And thousands

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of hustling industry zudes with airconditioned jackets and forty or fifty terabytes mounted right at the bridge of the nose. Ciudad Juarez was in the grip of rampant spexmania. Maybe it was all the lithium in their water.

Today, duty called Deep Eddy to Düsseldorf in Europe. Duty did not have to call very hard to get Eddy's attention. The mere whisper of duty was enough to dislodge Deep Eddy, who still lived with his parents, Bob and Lisa.

He'd gotten some spexmail and a package from the president of the local chapter. *A network obligation; our group credibility depends on you, Eddy. A delivery job. Don't let us down; do whatever it takes. And keep your eyes covered—this one could be dangerous.* Well, danger and Deep Eddy were fast friends. Throwing up tequila and ephedrine through your nose in an alley in Mexico, while wearing a pair of computer-assisted glasses worth as much as a car—now *that* was dangerous. Most people would be scared to try something like that. Most people couldn't master their own insecurities. Most people were too scared to live.

This would be Deep Eddy's first adult trip to Europe. At the age of nine he'd accompanied Bob and Lisa to Madrid for a Sexual Deliberation conference, but all he remembered from that trip was a boring weekend of bad television and incomprehensible tomato-soaked food. Düsseldorf, however, sounded like real and genuine fun. The trip was probably even worth getting up at 07:15.

Eddy dabbed at his raw eyelids with a saline-soaked wipey. Eddy was getting a first-class case of eyeball-burn off his spex; or maybe it was just sleeplessness. He'd spent a very late and highly frustrating night with his current girlfriend, Djulia. He'd dated her hoping for a hero's farewell, hinting broadly that he might be beaten or killed by sinister European underground networking-mavens, but his presentation hadn't washed at all. Instead of some sustained and attentive frolic, he'd gotten only a somber four-hour lecture about the emotional center in Djulia's life: collecting Japanese glassware.

As his jet gently lifted from the Chattanooga tarmac, Deep Eddy was struck with a sudden, instinctive, gut-level conviction of Djulia's essential counter-productivity. Djulia was just no good for him. Those clear eyes, the tilted nose, the sexy sprinkle of tattoo across her right cheekbone. Lovely flare of her body-heat in darkness. The lank strands of dark hair that turned crisp and wavy halfway down their length. A girl shouldn't have such great hair and so many tatts and still be so tightly wrapped. Djulia was no real friend of his at all.

The jet climbed steadily, crossing the shining waters of the Tennessee. Outside Eddy's window, the long ductile wings bent and rippled with dainty, tightly controlled antiturbulence. The cabin itself felt as steady as a Mississippi lumber barge, but the computer-assisted wings, under spex-analysis, resembled a vibrating sawblade. Nerve-racking. *Let this not be the day a whole bunch of Chattanoogans fall out of the sky,* Eddy thought silently, squirming a bit in the luscious embrace of his beanbag.

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He gazed about the cabin at his fellow candidates for swift mass death. Three hundred people or so, the European and NAFTA jet-bourgeoisie; well-groomed, polite. Nobody looked frightened. Sprawling there in their pastel beanbags, chatting, hooking fiber-optics to palmtops and laptops, browsing through newspads, making videophone-calls. Just as if they were at home, or maybe in a very crowded cylindrical hotel lobby, all of them in blank and deliberate ignorance of the fact that they were zipping through midair supported by nothing but plasmajets and computation. Most people were so unaware. One software glitch somewhere, a missed decimal point, and those cleverly ductile wings would tear right the hell off. Sure, it didn't happen often. But it happened sometimes.

Deep Eddy wondered glumly if his own demise would even make the top of the newspad. It'd be in there all right, but probably hyperlinked five or six layers down.

The five-year-old in the beanbag behind Eddy entered a paroxysm of childish fear and glee. "My e-mail, Mom!" the kid chirped with desperate enthusiasm, bouncing up and down. "Mom! Mom, my *e-mail!* Hey Mom, get me my e-mail!"

A stew offered Eddy breakfast. He had a bowl of muesli and half-a-dozen boiled prunes. Then he broke out his travel card and ordered a mimosa. The booze didn't make him feel any more alert, though, so he ordered two more mimosas. Then he fell asleep.

Customs in Düsseldorf was awash. Summer tourists were pouring into the city like some vast migratory shoal of sardines. The people from outside Europe—from NAFTA, from the Sphere, from the South—were a tiny minority, though, compared to the vast intra-European traffic, who breezed through Customs completely unimpeded.

Uniformed inspectors were spexing the NAFTA and South baggage, presumably for guns or explosives, but their clunky government-issue spex looked a good five years out-of-date. Deep Eddy passed through the Customs chute without incident and had his passchip stamped. Passing out drunk on champagne and orange juice, then snoozing through the entire Atlantic crossing, had clearly been an excellent idea. It was 21:00 local time and Eddy felt quite alert and rested. Clearheaded. Ready for anything. Hungry.

Eddy wandered toward the icons signaling ground transport. A stocky woman in a bulky brown jacket stepped into his path. He stopped short. "Mr. Edward Dertouzas," she said.

"Right," Eddy said, dropping his bag. They stared at one another, spex to spex. "Actually, fraulein, as I'm sure you can see by my on-line bio, my friends call me Eddy. Deep Eddy, mostly."

"I'm not your friend, Mr. Dertouzas. I am your security escort. I'm called Sardelle today." Sardelle stooped and hefted his travel bag. Her head came about to his shoulder.

Deep Eddy's German translator, which he had restored to life, placed a yellow subtitle at the lower rim of his spex. "Sardelle," he noted.

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" *'Anchovy'?*" "I don't pick the code names," Sardelle told him, irritated. "I have to use what the company gives me." She heaved her way through the crowd, jolting people aside with deft jabs of Eddy's travel bag. Sardelle wore a bulky airconditioned brown trenchcoat, with multipocketed fawn-colored jeans and thicksoled black-and-white cop shoes. A crisp trio of small tattooed triangles outlined Sardelle's right cheek. Her hands, attractively small and dainty, were gloved in black-and-white pinstripe. She looked about thirty. No problem. He liked mature women. Maturity gave depth.

Eddy scanned her for bio data. "Sardelle," the spex read unhelpfully. Absolutely nothing else; no business, no employer, no address, no age, no interests, no hobbies, no personal ads. Europeans were rather weird about privacy. Then again, maybe Sardelle's lack of proper annotation had something to do with her business life.

Eddy looked down at his own hands, twitched bare fingers over a virtual menu in midair, and switched to some rude spexware he'd mail-ordered from Tijuana. Something of a legend in the spexing biz, X-Spex stripped people's clothing off and extrapolated the flesh beneath it in a full-color visual simulation. Sardelle, however, was so decked-out in waistbelts, holsters, and shoulderpads that the Xware was baffled. The simulation looked alarmingly bogus, her breasts and shoulders waggling like drug-addled plasticine.

"Hurry out," she suggested sternly. "I mean hurry *up*."

"Where we going? To see the Critic?"

"In time," Sardelle said. Eddy followed her through the stomping, shuffling, heaving crowd to a set of travel lockers.

"Do you really need this bag, sir?"

"What?" Eddy said. "Sure I do! It's got all my stuff in it."

"If we take it, I will have to search it carefully," Sardelle informed him patiently. "Let's place your bag in this locker, and you can retrieve it when you leave Europe." She offered him a small gray handbag with the logo of a Berlin luxury hotel. "Here are some standard travel necessities."

"They scanned my bag in Customs," Eddy said. "I'm clean, really. Customs was a walk-through."

Sardelle laughed briefly and sarcastically. "One million people coming to Düsseldorf this weekend," she said. "There will be a Wende here. And you think the Customs searched you properly? Believe me, Edward. You have not been searched properly."

"That sounds a bit menacing," Eddy said.

"A proper search takes a lot of time. Some threats to safety are tiny—things woven into clothing, glued to the skin. . . ." Sardelle shrugged. "I like to have time. I'll *pay* you to have some time. Do you need money, Edward?"

"No," Eddy said, startled. "I mean, yeah. Sure I need money, who doesn't? But I have a travel card from my people. From CAPCLUG."

She glanced up sharply, aiming the spex at him. "Who is Kapklug?"

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"Computer-Assisted Perception Civil Liberties Users Group," Eddy said. "Chattanooga Chapter."

"I see. The acronym in English." Sardelle frowned. "I hate all acronyms. . . . Edward, I will pay you forty ecu cash to put your bag into this locker and take this bag instead."

"Sold," Deep Eddy said. "Where's the money?"

Sardelle passed him four wellworn hologram bills. Eddy stuffed the cash in his pocket. Then he opened his own bag and retrieved an elderly hardbound book—*Crowds and Power,* by Elias Canetti. "A little light reading," he said unconvincingly.

"Let me see that book," Sardelle insisted. She leafed through the book rapidly, scanning pages with her pinstriped fingertips, flexing the covers and checking the book's binding, presumably for inserted razors, poisoned needles, or strips of plastic explosive. "You are smuggling data," she concluded sourly, handing it back.

"That's what we live for in CAPCLUG," Eddy told her, peeking at her over his spex and winking. He slipped the book into the gray hotel bag and zipped it. Then he heaved his own bag into the travel locker, slammed the door and removed the numbered key.

"Give me that key," Sardelle said.

"Why?"

"You might return and open the locker. If I keep the key, that security risk is much reduced."

"No way," Eddy frowned. "Forget it."

"Ten ecu," she offered.

"Mmmmph."

"Fifteen."

"Okay, have it your way." Eddy gave her the key. "Don't lose it."

Sardelle, unsmiling, put the key into a zippered sleeve pocket. "I never lose things." She opened her wallet.

Eddy nodded, pocketing a hologram ten and five singles. Very attractive currency, the ecu. The ten had a hologram of René Descartes, a very deep zude who looked impressively French and rational.

Eddy felt he was doing pretty well by this, so far. In point of fact there wasn't anything in the bag he really needed: his underwear, spare jeans, tickets, business cards, dress shirts, tie, suspenders, spare shoes, toothbrush, aspirin, instant expresso, sewing kit, and earrings. So what? It wasn't as if she'd asked him to give up his spex.

He also had a complete crush on his escort. The name Anchovy suited her—she struck him as a small canned cold fish. Eddy found this perversely attractive. In fact he found her so attractive that he was having a hard time standing still and breathing normally. He really liked the way she carried her stripe-gloved hands, deft and feminine and mysteriously European, but mostly it was her hair. Long, light reddish-brown, and meticulously braided by machine. He loved women's hair when it was machine-braided. They couldn't seem to catch the fashion quite right in NAFTA. Sardelle's hair looked like a rusted mass of museum-quality

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chain-mail, or maybe some fantastically convoluted railway intersection. Hair that really *meant business*. Not only did Sardelle have not a hair out of place, but any unkemptness was *topologically impossible*. The vision rose unbidden of running his fingers through it in the dark.

"I'm starving," he announced.

"Then we will eat," she said. They headed for the exit.

Electric taxis were trying, without much success, to staunch the spreading hemorrhage of tourists. Sardelle clawed at the air with her pinstriped fingers. Adjusting invisible spex menus. She seemed to be casting the evil eye on a nearby family group of Italians, who reacted with scarcely concealed alarm. "We can walk to a city bus-stop," she told him. "It's quicker."

"Walking's quicker?"

Sardelle took off. He had to hurry to keep up. "Listen to me, Edward. If you follow my security suggestions, we will save time. If I save my time, then you will make money. If you make me work harder I will not be so generous."

"I'm easy," Eddy protested. Her cop-shoes seemed to have some kind of computational cushion built into the soles; she walked as if mounted on springs. "I'm here to meet the Cultural Critic. An audience with him. I have a delivery for him. You know that, right?"

"It's the book?"

Eddy hefted the gray hotel-bag. "Yeah. . . . I'm here in Düsseldorf to deliver an old book to some European intellectual. Actually, to give the book back to him. He, like, lent the book to the CAPCLUG Steering Committee, and it's time to give it back. How tough can that job be?"

"Probably not very tough," Sardelle said calmly. "But strange things happen during a Wende."

Eddy nodded soberly. "Wendes are very interesting phenomena. CAPCLUG is studying Wendes. We might like to throw one some day."

"That's not how Wendes happen, Eddy. You don't 'throw' a Wende." Sardelle paused, considering. "A Wende throws *you*."

"So I gather," Eddy said. "I've been reading his work, you know. The Cultural Critic. It's deep work, I like it."

Sardelle was indifferent. "I'm not one of his partisans. I'm just employed to guard him." She conjured up another menu. "What kind of food do you like? Chinese? Thai? Eritrean?"

"How about German food?"

Sardelle laughed. "We Germans never eat German food. . . . There are very good Japanese cafes in Düsseldorf. Tokyo people fly here for the salmon. And the anchovies. . . ."

"You live here in Düsseldorf, Anchovy?"

"I live everywhere in Europe, Deep Eddy." Her voice fell. "Any city with a screen in front of it. . . . And they all have screens in Europe."

"Sounds fun. You want to trade some spexware?"

"No."

"You don't believe in *andwendungsoriente wissensverarbeitung*?"

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She made a face. "How clever of you to learn an appropriate German phrase. Speak English, Eddy. Your accent is truly terrible."

"Thank you kindly," Eddy said.

"You can't trade wares with me, Eddy, don't be silly. I would not give my security spexware to civilian Yankee hacker-boys."

"Don't own the copyright, huh?"

"There's that too." She shrugged, and smiled.

They were out of the airport now, walking south. Silent steady flow of electric traffic down Flughafenstrasse. The twilight air smelled of little white roses. They crossed at a traffic light. The German semiotics of ads and street-signs began to press with gentle culture-shock at the surface of Deep Eddy's brain. Garagenhof. Spezialist fur Mobil-Telefon. Burohausern. He put on some character-recognition ware to do translation, but the instant doubling of the words all around him only made him feel schizophrenic.

They took shelter in a lit bus kiosk, along with a pair of heavily tattooed gays toting grocery bags. A video-ad built into the side of the kiosk advertised German-language e-mail editors.

As Sardelle stood patiently, in silence, Eddy examined her closely for the first time. There was something odd and indefinitely European about the line of her nose. "Let's be friends, Sardelle. I'll take off my spex if you take off your spex."

"Maybe later," she said.

Eddy laughed. "You should get to know me. I'm a fun guy."

"I already know you."

An overcrowded bus passed. Its riders had festooned the robot bus with banners and mounted a klaxon on its roof, which emitted a cacophony of rapidfire bongo music.

"The Wende people are already hitting the buses," Sardelle noted sourly, shifting on her feet as if trampling grapes. "I hope we can get downtown."

"You've done some snooping on me, huh? Credit records and such? Was it interesting?"

Sardelle frowned. "It's my business to research records. I did nothing illegal. All by the book."

"No offense taken," Eddy said, spreading his hands. "But you must have learned I'm harmless. Let's unwrap a little."

Sardelle sighed. "I learned that you are an unmarried male, age eighteen-to-thirty-five. No steady job. No steady home. No wife, no children. Radical political leanings. Travels often. Your demographics are very high-risk."

"I'm twenty-two, to be exact." Eddy noticed that Sardelle showed no reaction to this announcement, but the two eavesdropping gays seemed quite interested. He smiled nonchalantly. "I'm here to network, that's all. Friend-of-a-friend situation. Actually, I'm pretty sure I share your client's politics. As far as I can figure his politics out."

"Politics don't matter," Sardelle said, bored and impatient. "I'm not

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concerned with politics. Men in your age group commit 80 percent of all violent crimes."

One of the gays spoke up suddenly, in heavily accented English. "Hey fraulein. We also have 80 percent of the charm!"

"And 90 percent of the fun," said his companion. "It's Wende time, Yankee boy. Come with us and we'll do some crimes." He laughed.

"Das ist sehr nett vohn Ihnen," Eddy said politely. "But I can't. I'm with nursie."

The first gay made a witty and highly idiomatic reply in German, to the effect, apparently, that he liked boys who wore sunglasses after dark, but Eddy needed more tattoos.

Eddy, having finished reading subtitles in midair, touched the single small black circle on his cheekbone. "Don't you like my solitaire? It's rather sinister in its reticence, don't you think?"

He'd lost them; they only looked puzzled.

A bus arrived.

"This will do," Sardelle announced. She fed the bus a ticket-chip and Eddy followed her on board. The bus was crowded, but the crowd seemed gentle; mostly Euro-Japanese out for a night on the town. They took a beanbag together in the back.

It had grown quite dark now. They floated down the street with machine-guided precision and a smooth dreamlike detachment. Eddy felt the spell of travel overcome him; the basic mammalian thrill of a live creature plucked up and dropped like a supersonic ghost on the far side of the planet. Another time, another place: whatever vast set of unlikelihoods had militated against his presence here had been defeated. A Friday night in Düsseldorf, July 13, 2035. The time was 22:10. The very specificity seemed magical.

He glanced at Sardelle again, grinning gleefully, and suddenly saw her for what she was. A burdened female functionary sitting stiffly in the back of a bus.

"Where are we now, exactly?" he said.

"We are on Danzigerstrasse heading south to the Altstadt," Sardelle said. "The old town center."

"Yeah? What's there?"

"Kartoffel. Beer. Schnitzel. Things for you to eat."

The bus stopped and crowd of stomping, shoving rowdies got on. Across the street, a trio of police were struggling with a broken traffic securicam. The cops were wearing full-body pink riot-gear. He'd heard somewhere that all European cop riot-gear was pink. The color was supposed to be calming.

"This isn't much fun for you, Sardelle, is it?"

She shrugged. "We're not the same people, Eddy. I don't know what you are bringing to the Critic, and I don't want to know." She tapped her spex back into place with one gloved finger. "But if you fail in your job, at the very worst, it might mean some grave cultural loss. Am I right?"

"I suppose so. Sure."

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"But if I fail in *my* job, Eddy, something *real* might *actually happen*."

"Wow," Eddy said, stung.

The crush in the bus was getting oppressive. Eddy stood and offered his spot in the beanbag to a tottering old woman in spangled party gear.

Sardelle rose then too, with bad grace, and fought her way up the aisle. Eddy followed, barking his shins on the thicksoled beastie-boots of a sprawling drunk.

Sardelle stopped short to trade elbow-jabs with a Nordic kamikaze in a horned baseball cap, and Eddy stumbled into her headlong. He realized then why people seemed so eager to get out of Sardelle's way; her trenchcoat was of woven ceramic and was as rough as sandpaper. He lurched one-handed for a strap. "Well," he puffed at Sardelle, swaying into her spex-to-spex, "if we can't enjoy each other's company, why not get this over with? Let me do my errand. Then I'll get right into your hair." He paused, shocked. "I mean, *out* of your hair. Sorry."

She hadn't noticed. "You'll do your errand," she said, clinging to her strap. They were so close that he could feel a chill airconditioned breeze whiffling out of her trenchcoat's collar. "But on my terms. My time, my circumstances." She wouldn't meet his eyes; her head darted around as if from grave embarrassment. Eddy realized suddenly that she was methodically scanning the face of every stranger in the bus.

She spared him a quick, distracted smile. "Don't mind me, Eddy. Be a good boy and have fun in Düsseldorf. Just let me do my job, okay?"

"Okay then," Eddy muttered. "Really, I'm delighted to be in your hands." He couldn't seem to stop with the double entendres. They rose to his lips like drool from the id.

The glowing grids of Düsseldorf highrises shone outside the bus windows, patchy waffles of mystery. So many human lives behind those windows. People he would never meet, never see. Pity he still couldn't afford proper telephotos.

Eddy cleared his throat. "What's he doing out there right now? The Cultural Critic, I mean."

"Meeting contacts in a safehouse. He will meet a great many people during the Wende. That's his business, you know. You're only one of many that he bringed—brought—to this rendezvous." Sardelle paused. "Though in threat potential you do rank among the top five."

The bus made more stops. People piled in headlong, with a thrash and a heave and a jacking of kneecaps. Inside the bus they were all becoming anchovies. A smothered fistfight broke out in the back. A drunken woman tried, with mixed success, to vomit out the window. Sardelle held her position grimly through several stops, then finally fought her way to the door.

The bus pulled to a stop and a sudden rush of massed bodies propelled them out.

They'd arrived by a long suspension bridge over a broad moonsilvered river. The bridge's soaring cables were lit end-to-end with winking partybulbs. All along the bridge, flea-marketeers sitting cross-legged on glowing mats were doing a brisk trade in tourist junk. Out in the center, a

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busking juggler with smart-gloves flung lit torches in flaming arcs three stories high.

"Jesus, what a beautiful river," Eddy said.

"It's the Rhine. This is Oberkasseler Bridge."

"The Rhine. Of course, of course. I've never seen the Rhine before. Is it safe to drink?"

"Of course. Europe's very civilized."

"I thought so. It even smells good. Let's go drink some of it."

The banks were lined with municipal gardens: grape-musky vineyards, big pale meticulous flowerbeds. Tireless gardening robots had worked them over season by season with surgical trowels. Eddy stooped by the riverbank and scooped up a double-handful of backwash from a passing hydrofoil. He saw his own spex-clad face in the moony puddle of his hands. As Sardelle watched, he sipped a bit and flung the rest out as libation to the spirit of place.

"I'm happy now," he said. "Now I'm really here."

By midnight, he'd had four beers, two schnitzels, and a platter of kartoffels. Kartoffels were fried potato-batter waffles with a side of applesauce. Eddy's morale had soared from the moment he first bit into one.

They sat at a sidewalk cafe-table in the midst of a centuries-old pedestrian street in the Altstadt. The entire street was a single block-long bar, all chairs, umbrellas, and cobbles, peaked-roof townhouses with ivy and windowboxes and ancient copper weathervanes. It had been invaded by an absolute throng of gawking, shuffling, hooting foreigners.

The gentle, kindly, rather bewildered Düsseldorfers were doing their level best to placate their guests and relieve them of any excess cash. A strong pink police presence was keeping good order. He'd seen two zudes in horned baseball-caps briskly hauled into a paddy-wagon—a "Pink Minna"—but the Vikings were pig-drunk and had it coming, and the crowd seemed very good-humored.

"I don't see what the big deal is with these Wendes," Deep Eddy said, polishing his spex on a square of oiled and lint-free polysilk. "This sucker's a walk-through. There's not gonna be any trouble here. Just look how calm and mellow these zudes are."

"There's trouble already," Sardelle said. "It's just not here in Altstadt in front of your nose."

"Yeah?"

"There are big gangs of arsonists across the river tonight. They're barricading in Neuss, toppling cars, and setting them on fire."

"How come?"

Sardelle shrugged. "They are anti-car activists. They demand pedestrian rights and more mass transit. . . ." She paused a bit to read the inside of her spex. "Green radicals are storming the Lobbecke Museum. They want all extinct insect specimens surrendered for cloning. . . . Heinrich Heine University is on strike for academic freedom, and someone has glue-bombed the big traffic tunnel beneath the campus. . . . But this

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is nothing, not yet. Tomorrow England meets Ireland in the soccer finals at Rhein-Stadium. There will be hell to pay."

"Huh. That sounds pretty bad."

"Yes." She smiled. "So let's enjoy our time here, Eddy. Idleness is sweet. Even on the edge of dirty chaos."

"But none of those events by itself sounds all that threatening or serious."

"Not each thing by itself, Eddy, no. But it all happens all at once. That's what a Wende is like."

"I don't get it," Eddy said. He put his spex back on and lit the menu from within, with a fingersnap. He tapped the spex menu-bar with his right fingertip and light-amplifiers kicked in. The passing crowd, their outlines shimmering slightly from computational effects, seemed to be strolling through an overlit stage-set. "I guess there's trouble coming from all these outsiders," Eddy said, "but the Germans themselves seem so . . . well . . . so good-natured and tidy and civilized. Why do they even have Wendes?"

"It's not something we plan, Eddy. It's just something that happens to us." Sardelle sipped her coffee.

"How could this happen and not be planned?"

"Well, we knew it was coming, of course. Of course we knew *that*. Word gets around. That's how Wendes start." She straightened her napkin. "You can ask the Critic, when you meet him. He talks a lot about Wendes. He knows as much as anyone, I think."

"Yeah, I've read him," Eddy said. "He says that it's rumor, boosted by electronic and digital media, in a feedback-loop with crowd dynamics and modern mass transportation. A nonlinear networking phenomenon. That much I understand! But then he quotes some zude named Elias Canetti. . . ." Eddy patted the gray bag. "I tried to read Canetti, I really did, but he's twentieth-century, and as boring and stuffy as hell. . . . Anyway, we'd handle things differently in Chattanooga."

"People say that, until they have their first Wende," Sardelle said. "Then it's all different. Once you know a Wende can actually happen to you . . . well, it changes everything."

"We'd take steps to stop it, that's all. Take steps to control it. Can't you people take some steps?"

Sardelle tugged off her pinstriped gloves and set them on the tabletop. She worked her bare fingers gently, blew on her fingertips, and picked a big bready pretzel from the basket. Eddy noticed with surprise that her gloves had big rock-hard knuckles and twitched a little all by themselves.

"There are things you can do, of course," she told him. "Put police and firefighters on overtime. Hire more private security. Disaster control for lights, traffic, power, data. Open the shelters and stock first-aid medicine. And warn the whole population. But when a city tells its people that a Wende is coming, that *guarantees* the Wende will come. . . ." Sardelle sighed. "I've worked Wendes before. But this is a big one. A big, dark

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one. And it won't be over, it can't be over—not until everyone knows that it's gone, and feels that it's gone."

"That doesn't make much sense."

"Talking about it won't help, Eddy. You and I, talking about it—we become part of the Wende ourselves, you see? We're here because of the Wende. We met because of the Wende. And we can't leave each other, until the Wende goes away." She shrugged. "Can you go away, Eddy?"

"No . . . . Not right now. But I've got stuff to do here."

"So does everybody else."

Eddy grunted and killed another beer. The beer here was truly something special. "It's a Chinese finger-trap," he said, gesturing.

"Yes, I know those."

He grinned. "Suppose we both stop pulling? We could walk through it. Leave town. I'll throw the book in the river. Tonight you and I could fly back to Chattanooga. Together."

She laughed. "You wouldn't really do that, though."

"You don't know me after all."

"You spit in the face of your friends? And I lose my job? A high price to pay for one gesture. For a young man's pretense of free will."

"I'm not pretending, lady. Try me. I dare you."

"Then you're drunk."

"Well, there's that." He laughed. "But don't joke about liberty. Liberty's the realest thing there is." He stood up and hunted out the bathroom.

On his way back he stopped at a payphone. He gave it fifty centimes and dialed Tennessee. Djulia answered.

"What time is it?" he said.

"Nineteen. Where are you?"

"Düsseldorf."

"Oh." She rubbed her nose. "Sounds like you're in a bar."

"Bingo."

"So what's new, Eddy?"

"I know you put a lot of stock in honesty," Eddy said. "So I thought I'd tell you I'm planning an affair. I met this German girl here and frankly, she's irresistible."

Djulia frowned darkly. "You've got a lot of nerve telling me that kind of crap with your spex on."

"Oh yeah," he said. He took them off and stared into the monitor. "Sorry."

"You're drunk, Eddy," Djulia said. "I hate it when you're drunk! You'll say and do anything if you're drunk and on the far end of a phone-line." She rubbed nervously at her newest cheek-tattoo. "Is this one of your weird jokes?"

"Yeah. It is, actually. The chances are eighty to one that she'll turn me down flat." Eddy laughed. "But I'm gonna try anyway. Because you're not letting me live and breathe."

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Djulia's face went stiff. "When we're face-to-face, you always abuse my trust. That's why I don't like for us to go past virching."

"Come off it, Djulia."

She was defiant. "If you think you'll be happier with some weirdo virch-whore in Europe, go ahead! I don't know why you can't do that by wire from Chattanooga, anyway."

"This is Europe. We're talking actuality here."

Djulia was shocked. "If you actually touch another woman I never want to see you again." She bit her lip. "Or do wire with you, either. I mean that, Eddy. You know I do."

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

He hung up, got change from the phone, and dialed his parents' house. His father answered.

"Hi, Bob. Lisa around?"

"No," his father said, "it's her night for optic macrame. How's Europe?"

"Different."

"Nice to hear from you, Eddy. We're kind of short of money. I can spare you some sustained attention, though."

"I just dumped Djulia."

"Good move, son," his father said briskly. "Fine. Very serious girl, Djulia. Way too strait-laced for you. A kid your age should be dating girls who are absolutely jumping out of their skins."

Eddy nodded.

"You didn't lose your spex, did you?"

Eddy held them up on their neck chain. "Safe and sound."

"Hardly recognized you for a second," his father said. "Ed, you're such a serious-minded kid. Taking on all these responsibilities. On the road so much, spexware day in and day out. Lisa and I network about you all the time. Neither of us did a day's work before we were thirty, and we're all the better for it. You've got to live, son. Got to find yourself. Smell the roses. If you want to stay in Europe a couple of months, forget the algebra courses."

"It's calculus, Bob."

"Whatever."

"Thanks for the good advice, Bob. I know you mean it."

"It's good news about Djulia, son. You know we don't invalidate your feelings, so we never said a goddamn thing to you, but her glassware really sucked. Lisa says she's got no goddamn aesthetics at all. That's a hell of a thing, in a woman."

"That's my mom," Eddy said. "Give Lisa my best." He hung up.

He went back out to the sidewalk table. "Did you eat enough?" Sardelle asked.

"Yeah. It was good."

"Sleepy?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Do you have a place to stay, Eddy? Hotel reservations?"

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Eddy shrugged. "No. I don't bother, usually. What's the use? It's more fun winging it."

"Good," Sardelle nodded. "It's better to wing. No one can trace us. It's safer."

She found them shelter in a park, where an activist group of artists from Munich had set up a squatter pavilion. As squatter pavilions went, it was quite a nice one, new and in good condition: a giant soap-bubble upholstered in cellophane and polysilk. It covered half an acre with crisp yellow bubblepack flooring. The shelter was illegal and therefore anonymous. Sardelle seemed quite pleased abut this.

Once through the zippered airlock, Eddy and Sardelle were forced to examine the artists' multimedia artwork for an entire grueling hour. Worse yet, they were closely quizzed afterward by an expert-system, which bullied them relentlessly with arcane aesthetic dogma.

This ordeal was too high a price for most squatters. The pavilion, though attractive, was only half-full, and many people who had shown up bone-tired were fleeing the art headlong. Deep Eddy, however, almost always aced this sort of thing. Thanks to his slick responses to the computer's quizzing, he won himself quite a nice area, with a blanket, opaquable curtains, and its own light fixtures. Sardelle, by contrast, had been bored and minimal, and had won nothing more advanced than a pillow and a patch of bubblepack among the philistines.

Eddy made good use of a traveling pay-toilet stall, and bought some mints and chilled mineral water from a robot. He settled in cozily as police sirens, and some distant, rather choked-sounding explosions, made the night glamorous.

Sardelle didn't seem anxious to leave. "May I see your hotel bag," she said.

"Sure." He handed it over. Might as well. She'd given it to him in the first place.

He'd thought she was going to examine the book again, but instead she took a small plastic packet from within the bag, and pulled the packet's ripcord. A colorful jumpsuit jumped out, with a chemical hiss and a vague hot stink of catalysis and cheap cologne. The jumpsuit, a one-piece, had comically baggy legs, frilled sleeves, and was printed all over with a festive cut-up of twentieth century naughty seaside postcards.

"Pajamas," Eddy said. "Gosh, how thoughtful."

"You can sleep in this if you want," Sardelle nodded, "but it's daywear. I want you to wear it tomorrow. And I want to buy the clothes you are wearing now, so that I can take them away for safety."

Deep Eddy was wearing a dress shirt, light jacket, American jeans, dappled stockings and Nashville brogues of genuine blue suede. "I can't wear that crap," he protested. "Jesus, I'd look like a total loser."

"Yes," said Sardelle with an enthusiastic nod, "It's very cheap and common. It will make you invisible. Just one more party boy among

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thousands and thousands. This is very secure dress, for a courier during a Wende."

"You want me to meet the Critic in this get-up?"

Sardelle laughed. "The Cultural Critic is not impressed by taste, Eddy. The eye he uses when he looks at people . . . he sees things other people can't see." She paused, considering. "He *might* be impressed if you showed up dressed in *this*. Not because of what it is, of course. But because it would show that you can understand and manipulate popular taste to your own advantage . . . just as he does."

"You're really being paranoid," Eddy said, nettled. "I'm not an assassin. I'm just some techie zude from Tennessee. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I believe you," she nodded. "You're very convincing. But that has nothing to do with proper security technique. If I take your clothes, there will be less operational risk."

"How much less risk? What do you expect to find in my clothes, anyway?"

"There are many, many things you *might* have done," she said patiently. "The human race is very ingenious. We have invented ways to kill, or hurt, or injure almost anyone, with almost nothing at all." She sighed. "If you don't know about such techniques already, it would only be stupid for me to tell you all about them. So let's be quick and simple, Eddy. It would make me happier to take your clothes away. A hundred ecu."

Eddy shook his head. "This time it's really going to cost you."

"Two hundred then," Sardelle said.

"Forget it."

"I can't go higher than two hundred. Unless you let me search your body cavities."

Eddy dropped his spex.

"Body cavities," Sardelle said impatiently. "You're a grown-up man, you must know about this. A great deal can be done with body cavities."

Eddy stared at her. "Can't I have some chocolate and roses first?"

"It's not chocolate and roses with us," Sardelle said sternly. "Don't talk to me about chocolate and roses. We're not lovers. We are client and bodyguard. It's an ugly business, I know. But it's only business."

"Yeah? Well, trading in body cavities is new to me." Deep Eddy rubbed his chin. "As a simple Yankee youngster I find this a little confusing. Maybe we could barter then? Tonight?"

She laughed harshly. "I won't sleep with you, Eddy. I won't sleep at all! You're only being foolish." Sardelle shook her head. Suddenly she lifted a densely braided mass of hair above her right ear. "Look here, Mr. Simple Yankee Youngster. I'll show you my favorite body cavity." There was a fleshcolored plastic duct in the side of her scalp. "It's illegal to have this done in Europe. I had it done in Turkey. This morning I took half a cc through there. I won't sleep until Monday."

"Jesus," Eddy said. He lifted his spex to stare at the small dimpled

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orifice. "Right through the blood-brain barrier? That must be a hell of an infection risk."

"I don't do it for fun. It's not like beer and pretzels. It's just that I won't sleep now. Not until the Wende is over." She put her hair back, and sat up with a look of composure. "Then I'll fly somewhere and lie in the sun and be very still. All by myself, Eddy."

"Okay," Eddy said, feeling a weird and muddy sort of pity for her. "You can borrow my clothes and search them."

"I have to burn the clothes. Two hundred ecu?"

"All right. But I keep these shoes."

"May I look at your teeth for free? It will only take five minutes."

"Okay," he muttered. She smiled at him, and touched her spex. A bright purple light emerged from the bridge of her nose.

At 08:00 a police drone attempted to clear the park. It flew overhead, barking robotic threats in five languages. Everyone simply ignored the machine.

Around 08:30 an actual line of human police showed up. In response, a group of the squatters brought out their own bullhorn, an enormous battery-powered sonic assault-unit.

The first earthshaking shriek hit Eddy like an electric prod. He'd been lying peacefully on his bubble-mattress, listening to the doltish yap of the robot chopper. Now he leapt quickly from his crash-padding and wormed his way into the crispy bubblepack cloth of his ridiculous jumpsuit.

Sardelle showed up while he was still tacking the jumpsuit's velcro buttons. She led him outside the pavilion.

The squatter bullhorn was up on an iron tripod pedestal, surrounded by a large group of grease-stained anarchists with helmets, earpads, and studded white batons. Their bullhorn's enormous ululating bellow was reducing everyone's nerves to jelly. It was like the shriek of Medusa.

The cops retreated, and the owners of the bullhorn shut it off, waving their glittering batons in triumph. In the deafened, jittery silence there were scattered shrieks, jeers, and claps, but the ambience in the park had become very bad: aggressive and surreal. Attracted by the apocalyptic shriek, people were milling into the park at a trot, spoiling for any kind of trouble.

They seemed to have little in common, these people; not their dress, not language, certainly nothing like a coherent political cause. They were mostly young men, and most of them looked as if they'd been up all night: red-eyed and peevish. They taunted the retreating cops. A milling gang knifed one of the smaller pavilions, a scarlet one, and it collapsed like a blood-blister under their trampling feet.

Sardelle took Eddy to the edge of the park, where the cops were herding up a crowd-control barricade-line of ambulant robotic pink beanbags. "I want to see this," he protested. His ears were ringing.

"They're going to fight," she told him.

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"About what?"

"Anything. Everything," she shouted. "It doesn't matter. They'll knock our teeth out. Don't be stupid." She took him by the elbow and they slipped through a gap in the closing battle-line.

The police had brought up a tracked glue-cannon truck. They now began to threaten the crowd with a pasting. Eddy had never seen a glue-cannon before—except on television. It was quite astonishing how frightening the machine looked, even in pink. It was squat, blind, and nozzled, and sat there buzzing like some kind of wheeled warrior termite.

Suddenly several of the cops standing around the machine began to flinch and duck. Eddy saw a glittering object carom hard off the glue-truck's armored canopy. It flew twenty meters and landed in the grass at his feet. He picked it up. It was a stainless-steel ball-bearing the size of a cow's eyeball.

"Airguns?" he said.

"Slingshots. Don't let one hit you."

"Oh yeah. Great advice, I guess." To the far side of the cops a group of people—some kind of closely organized protestors—were advancing in measured step under a tall two-man banner. It read, in English: *The Only Thing Worse Than Dying Is Outliving Your Culture.* Every man-jack of them, and there were at least sixty, carried a long plastic pike topped with an ominous-looking bulbous sponge. It was clear from the way they maneuvered that they understood military pike-tactics only too well; their phalanx bristled like a hedgehog, and some captain among them was barking distant orders. Worse yet, the pikemen had neatly outflanked the cops, who now began calling frantically for backup.

A police drone whizzed just above their heads, not the casual lumbering he had seen before, but direct and angry and inhumanly fast. "Run!" Sardelle shouted, taking his hands. "Peppergas . . ."

Eddy glanced behind him as he fled. The chopper, as if cropdusting, was farting a dense maroon fog. The crowd bellowed in shock and rage and, seconds later, that hellish bullhorn kicked in once more.

Sardelle ran with amazing ease and speed. She bounded along as if firecrackers were bursting under her feet. Eddy, years younger and considerably longer in leg, was very hard-put to keep up.

In two minutes they were well out of the park, across a broad street and into a pedestrian network of small shops and restaurants. There she stopped and let him catch his breath.

"Jesus," he puffed, "where can I buy shoes like that?"

"They're made-to-order," she told him calmly. "And you need special training. You can break your ankles, otherwise . . . ." She gazed at a nearby bakery. "You want some breakfast now?"

Eddy sampled a chocolate-filled pastry inside the shop, at a dainty, doily-covered table. Two ambulances rushed down the street, and a large group of drum-beating protesters swaggered by, shoving shoppers from the pavement; but otherwise things seemed peaceful. Sardelle sat with

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arms folded, staring into space. He guessed that she was reading security alerts from the insides of her spex.

"You're not tired, are you?" he said.

"I don't sleep on operations," she said, "but sometimes I like to sit very still." She smiled at him. "You wouldn't understand. . . ."

"Hell no I wouldn't," Eddy said, his mouth full. "All hell's breaking loose over there, and here you are sipping orange juice just as calm as a bump on a pickle. . . . Damn, these croissants, or whatever the hell they are, are really good. Hey! *Herr Ober!* Bring me another couple of those, *ja, danke. . . .*"

"The trouble could follow us anywhere. We're as safe here as any other place. Safer, because we're not in the open."

"Good," Eddy nodded, munching. "That park's a bad scene."

"It's not so bad in the park. It's very bad at the Rhein-Spire, though. The Mahogany Warbirds have seized the rotating restaurant. They're stealing skin."

"What are Warbirds?"

She seemed surprised. "You haven't heard of them? They're from NAFTA. A criminal syndicate. Insurance rackets, protection rackets, they run all the casinos in the Quebec Republic. . . ."

"Okay. So what's stealing skin?"

"It's a new kind of swindle; they take a bit of skin or blood, with your genetics, you see, and a year later they tell you they have a newborn son or daughter of yours held captive, held somewhere secret in the South. . . . Then they try to make you pay, and pay, and pay. . . ."

"You mean they're kidnaping genetics from the people in that restaurant?"

"Yes. Brunch in the Rhein-Spire is very prestigious. The victims are all rich or famous." Suddenly she laughed, rather bitter, rather cynical. "I'll be busy next year, Eddy, thanks to this. A new job—protecting my clients' skin."

Eddy thought about it. "It's kind of like the rent-a-womb business, huh? But really twisted."

She nodded. "The Warbirds are crazy, they're not even ethnic criminals, they are network interest-group creatures. . . . Crime is so damned ugly, Eddy. If you ever think of doing it, just stop."

Eddy grunted.

"Think of those children," she murmured. "Born from crime. Manufactured to order, for a criminal purpose. This is a strange world, isn't it? It frightens me sometimes."

"Yeah?" Eddy said cheerfully. "Illegitimate son of a millionaire, raised by a high-tech mafia? Sounds kind of weird and romantic to me. I mean, consider the possibilities."

She took off her spex for the first time, to look at him. Her eyes were blue. A very odd and romantic shade of blue. Probably tinted contacts.

"Rich people have been having illegitimate kids since the year zero,"

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Eddy said. "The only difference is somebody's mechanized the process." He laughed.

"It's time you met the Cultural Critic," she said. She put the spex back on.

They had to walk a long way. The bus system was now defunct. Apparently the soccer fans made a sport of hitting public buses; they would rip all the beanbags out and kick them through the doors. On his way to meet the Critic, Eddy saw hundreds of soccer fans; the city was swarming with them. The English devotees were very bad news; savage, thick-booted, snarling, stamping, chanting, anonymous young men, in knee-length sandpaper coats, with their hair cropped short and their faces masked or war-painted in the Union Jack. The English soccer hooligans traveled in enormous packs of two and three hundred. They were armed with cheap cellular phones. They'd wrapped the aerials with friction tape to form truncheon handles, so that the high-impact ceramic phone-casing became a nasty club. It was impossible to deny a traveler the ownership of a telephone, so the police were impotent to stop this practice. Practically speaking, there was not much to be done in any case. The English hooligans dominated the streets through sheer force of numbers. Anyone seeing them simply fled headlong.

Except, of course, for the Irish soccer fans. The Irish wore thick elbow-length grappling gloves, some kind of workmen's gauntlets apparently, along with long green-and-white football-scarves. Their scarves had skull-denting weights sewn into pockets at their ends, and the tassels fringed with little skin-ripping wire barbs. The weights were perfectly legitimate rolls of coins, and the wire—well, you could get wire anywhere. The Irish seemed to be outnumbered, but were, if anything, even drunker and more reckless than their rivals. Unlike the English, the Irish louts didn't even use the cellular phones to coordinate their brawling. They just plunged ahead at a dead run, whipping their scarves overhead and screaming about Oliver Cromwell.

The Irish were terrifying. They traveled down streets like a scourge. Anything in their way they knocked over and trampled: knickknack kiosks, propaganda videos, poster-booths, T-shirt tables, people selling canned jumpsuits. Even the postnatal abortion people, who were true fanatics, and the scary, eldritch, black-clad pro-euthanasia groups, would abandon their sidewalk podiums to flee from the Irish kids.

Eddy shuddered to think what the scene must be like at the Rhein-Stadium. "Those are some mean goddamn kids," he told Sardelle, as they emerged from hiding in an alley. "And it's all about *soccer?* Jesus, that seems so pointless."

"If they rioted in their *own* towns, *that* would be pointless," Sardelle said. "Here at the Wende, they can smash each other, and everything else, and tomorrow they will be perfectly safe at home in their own world."

"Oh, I get it," Eddy said. "That makes a lot of sense."

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A passing blonde woman in a Muslim hijab slapped a button onto Eddy's sleeve. "Will your lawyer talk to God?" the button demanded aloud, repeatedly, in English. Eddy plucked the device off and stamped on it.

The Cultural Critic was holding court in a safehouse in Stadtmitte. The safehouse was an anonymous twentieth-century four-story dump, flanked by some nicely retrofitted nineteenth-century townhouses. A graffitti gang had hit the block during the night, repainting the street-surface with a sprawling polychrome mural, all big grinning green kitty-cats, fractal spirals, and leaping priapic pink pigs. "Hot Spurt!" one of the pigs suggested eagerly; Eddy skirted its word balloon as they approached the door.

The door bore a small brass plaque reading "E.I.S.—Elektronisches Invasionsabwehr-Systems GmbH." There was an inscribed corporate logo that appeared to be a melting ice-cube.

Sardelle spoke in German to the door video; it opened, and they entered a hall full of pale, drawn adults in suits, armed with fire-extinguishers. Despite their air of nervous resolution and apparent willingness to fight hand-to-hand, Eddy took them for career academics: modestly dressed, ties and scarves slightly askew, odd cheek-tattoos, distracted gazes, too serious. The place smelled bad, like stale cottage-cheese and bookshelf dust. The dirt-smudged walls were festooned with schematics and wiring diagrams, amid a bursting mess of tower-stacked scrawl-labeled cartons—disk archives of some kind. The ceiling and floorboards were festooned with taped-down power-cables and fiber-optic network wiring.

"Hi, everybody!" Eddy said. "How's it going?" The building's defenders looked at him, noted his jumpsuit costume, and reacted with relieved indifference. They began talking in French, obviously resuming some briefly postponed and intensely important discussion.

"Hello," said a German in his thirties, rising to his feet. He had long, thinning, greasy hair and a hollow-cheeked, mushroom-pale face. He wore secretarial half-spex; and behind them he had the shiftiest eyes Eddy had ever seen, eyes that darted, and gloated, and slid around the room. He worked his way through the defenders, and smiled at Eddy, vaguely. "I am your host. Welcome, friend." He extended a hand.

Eddy shook it. He glanced sidelong at Sardelle. Sardelle had gone as stiff as a board and had jammed her gloved hands in her trenchcoat pockets.

"So," Eddy gabbled, snatching his hand back, "thanks a lot for having us over!"

"You'll be wanting to see my famous friend the Cultural Critic," said their host, with a cadaverous smile. "He is upstairs. This is my place. I own it." He gazed around himself, brimming with satisfaction. "It's my Library, you see. I have the honor of hosting the great man for the Wende. He appreciates my work. Unlike so many others." Their host dug into the pocket of his baggy slacks. Eddy, instinctively expecting a drawn

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knife, was vaguely surprised to see his host hand over an old-fashioned, dogeared business card. Eddy glanced at it. "How are you, Herr Schreck?"

"Life is very exciting today," said Schreck with a smirk. He touched his spex and examined Eddy's on-line bio. "A young American visitor. How charming."

"I'm from NAFTA," Eddy corrected.

"And a civil libertarian. Liberty is the only word that still excites me," Schreck said, with itchy urgency. "I need many more American intimates. Do make use of me. And all my digital services. That card of mine—do call those network addresses and tell your friends. The more, the happier." He turned to Sardelle. "*Kaffee, fraulein? Zigaretten?*"

Sardelle shook her head minimally.

"It's good she's here," Schreck told Eddy. "She can help us to fight. You go upstairs. The great man is waiting for visitors."

"I'm going up with him," Sardelle said.

"Stay here," Schreck urged. "The security threat is to the Library, not to him."

"I'm a bodyguard," Sardelle said frostily. "I guard the body. I don't guard data-havens."

Schreck frowned. "Well, more fool you, then."

Sardelle followed Eddy up the dusty, flower-carpeted stairs. Upstairs to the right was an antique twentieth-century office-door in blond oak and frosted glass. Sardelle knocked; someone called out in French.

She opened the door. Inside the office were two long workbenches covered with elderly desktop computers. The windows were barred and curtained.

The Cultural Critic, wearing spex and a pair of datagloves, sat in a bright pool of sunlight-yellow glare from a trackmounted overhead light. He was pecking daintily with his gloved fingertips at a wafer-thin data-screen of woven cloth.

As Sardelle and Eddy stepped into the office, the Critic wrapped up his screen in a scroll, removed his spex, and unplugged his gloves. He had dark pepper-and-salt tousled hair, a dark wool tie, and a long maroon scarf draped over a beautifully cut ivory jacket.

"You would be Mr. Dertouzas from CAPCLUG," he said.

"Exactly. How are you, sir?"

"Very well." He examined Eddy briefly. "I assume his clothing was your idea, Frederika."

Sardelle nodded once, with a sour look. Eddy smiled at her, delighted to learn her real name.

"Have a seat," the Critic offered. He poured himself more coffee. "I'd offer you a cup of this, but it's been . . . adjusted."

"I brought you your book," Eddy said. He sat, and opened the bag, and offered the item in question.

"Splendid." The Critic reached into his pocket and, to Eddy's surprise, pulled a knife. The Critic opened its blade with one thumbnail. The shining blade was sawtoothed in a fractal fashion; even its serrations

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had tiny serrated serrations. It was a jack-knife the length of a finger, with a razor-sharp edge on it as long as a man's arm.

Under the knife's irresistible ripping caress, the tough cover of the book parted with a discreet shredding of cloth. The Critic reached into the slit and plucked out a thin, gleaming storage disk. He set the book down. "Did you read this?"

"That disk?" Eddy ad-libbed. "I assumed it was encrypted."

"You assumed correctly, but I meant the book."

"I think it lost something in translation," Eddy said.

The Critic raised his brows. He had dark, heavy brows with a pronounced frown-line between them, over sunken, gray-green eyes. "You have read Canetti in the Italian, Mr. Dertouzas?"

"I meant the translation between centuries," Eddy said, and laughed. "What I read left me with nothing but questions . . . . Can you answer them for me, sir?"

The Critic shrugged and turned to a nearby terminal. It was a scholar's workstation, the least dilapidated of the machines in the office. He touched four keys in order; a carousel whirled and spat out a disk. The Critic handed it to Eddy. "You'll find your answers here, to whatever extent I can give them," he said. "My Complete Works. Please take this disk. Reproduce it, give it to whomever you like, as long as you accredit it. The standard scholarly procedure. I'm sure you know the etiquette."

"Thank you very much," Eddy said with dignity, tucking the disk into his bag. "Of course I own your works already, but I'm glad of a fully up-to-date edition."

"I'm told that a copy of my Complete Works will get you a cup of coffee at any cafe in Europe," the Critic mused, slotting the encrypted disk and rapidly tapping keys. "Apparently digital commodification is not entirely a spent force, even in literature. . . ." He examined the screen. "Oh, this is lovely. I *knew* I would need this data again. And I certainly didn't want it in my house." He smiled.

"What are you going to do with that data?" Eddy said.

"Do you really not know?" the Critic said. "And you from CAPCLUG, a group of such carnivorous curiosity? Well, that's also a strategy, I suppose." He tapped more keys, then leaned back and opened a pack of zigarettes.

"What strategy?"

"New elements, new functions, new solutions—I don't know what 'culture' is, but I know exactly what I'm doing." The Critic drew slowly on a zigarette, his brows knotting.

"And what's that, exactly?"

"You mean, what is the underlying concept?" He waved the zigarette. "I have no 'concept.' The struggle here must not be reduced to a single simple idea. I am building a structure that must not, cannot, be reduced to a single simple idea. I am building a structure that perhaps *suggests* a concept. . . . If I did more, the system itself would become stronger than the surrounding culture. . . . Any system of rational analysis must live

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within the strong blind body of mass humanity, Mr. Dertouzas. If we learned anything from the twentieth century, we learned that much, at least." The Critic sighed, a fragrant medicinal mist. "I fight windmills, sir. It's a duty. . . . You often are hurt, but at the same time you become unbelievably happy, because you see that you have both friends and enemies, and that you are capable of fertilizing society with contradictory attitudes."

"What enemies do you mean?" Eddy said.

"Here. Today. Another data-burning. It was necessary to stage a formal resistance."

"This is an evil place," Sardelle—or rather Frederika—burst out. "I had no idea this was today's safe-house. This is anything but safe. Jean-Arthur, you must leave this place at once. You could be killed here!"

"An evil place? Certainly. But there is so much megabytage devoted to works on goodness, and on doing good—so very little coherent intellectual treatment of the true nature of evil and being evil. . . . Of malice and stupidity and acts of cruelty and darkness. . . ." The Critic sighed. "Actually, once you're allowed through the encryption that Herr Schreck so wisely imposes on his holdings, you'll find the data here rather banal. The manuals for committing crime are farfetched and badly written. The schematics for bombs, listening devices, drug labs and so forth, are poorly designed and probably unworkable. The pornography is juvenile and overly anti-erotic. The invasions of privacy are of interest only to voyeurs. Evil is banal—by no means so scarlet as one's instinctive dread would paint it. It's like the sex-life of one's parents—a primal and forbidden topic, and yet, with objectivity, basically integral to their human nature—and of course to your own."

"Who's planning to burn this place?" Eddy said.

"A rival of mine. He calls himself the Moral Referee."

"Oh yeah, I've heard of him!" Eddy said. "He's here in Düsseldorf too? Jesus."

"He is a charlatan," the Critic sniffed. "Something of an ayatollah figure. A popular demagogue. . . ." He glanced at Eddy. "Yes, yes—of course people do say much the same of me, Mr. Dertouzas, and I'm perfectly aware of that. But I have two doctorates, you know. The Referee is a self-appointed digital Savonarola. Not a scholar at all. An autodidactic philosopher. At best an artist."

"Aren't you an artist?"

"That's the danger. . . ." the Critic nodded. "Once I was only a teacher, then suddenly I felt a sense of mission. . . . I began to understand which works are strongest, which are only decorative. . . ." The Critic looked suddenly restless, and puffed at his zigarette again. "In Europe there is too much couture, too little culture. In Europe everything is colored by discourse. There is too much knowledge and too much fear to overthrow that knowledge. . . . In NAFTA you are too naïvely postmodern to suffer from this syndrome. . . . And the Sphere, the Sphere, they are orthogonal

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to both our concerns. . . . The South, of course, is the planet's last reservoir of authentic humanity, despite every ontological atrocity committed there. . . ."

"I'm not following you," Eddy said.

"Take that disk with you. Don't lose it," the Critic said somberly. "I have certain obligations, that's all. I must know why I made certain choices, and be able to defend them, and I *must* defend them, or risk losing everything. . . . Those choices are already made. I've drawn a line here, established a position. It's my Wende today, you know! My lovely Wende. . . . Through cusp-points like this one, I can make things different for the whole of society." He smiled. "Not better, necessarily—but different, certainly. . . ."

"People are coming," Frederika announced suddenly, standing bolt upright and gesturing at the air. "A lot of people marching in the streets outside . . . there's going to be trouble."

"I knew he would react the moment that data left this building," the Critic said, nodding. "Let trouble come! I will not move!"

"God damn you, I'm being paid to see that you survive!" Frederika said. "The Referee's people burn data-havens. They've done it before, and they'll do it again. Let's get out of here while there's still time!"

"We're all ugly and evil," the Critic announced calmly, settling deeply into his chair and steepling his fingers. "Bad knowledge is still legitimate self-knowledge. Don't pretend otherwise."

"That's no reason to fight them hand-to-hand here in Düsseldorf! We're not tactically prepared to defend this building! Let them burn it! What's one more stupid outlaw and his rat-nest full of garbage?"

The Critic looked at her with pity. "It's not the access that matters. It's the principle."

"Bullseye!" Eddy shouted, recognizing a CAPCLUG slogan.

Frederika, biting her lip, leaned over a tabletop and began typing invisibly on a virtual keyboard. "If you call your professional backup," the Critic told her, "they'll only be hurt. This is not really your fight, my dear; you're not committed."

"Fuck you and your politics; if you burn up in here we don't get our bonuses," Frederika shouted.

"No reason *he* should stay, at least," the Critic said, gesturing to Eddy. "You've done well, Mr. Dertouzas. Thank you very much for your successful errand. It was most helpful." The Critic glanced at the workstation screen, where a program from the disk was still spooling busily, then back at Eddy again. "I suggest you leave this place while you can."

Eddy glanced at Frederika.

"Yes, go!" she said. "You're finished here, I'm not your escort any more. Run, Eddy!"

"No way," Eddy said, folding his arms. "If you're not moving, I'm not moving."

Frederika looked furious. "But you're free to go. You heard him say so."

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"So what? Since I'm at liberty, I'm also free to stay," Eddy retorted. "Besides, I'm from Tennessee, NAFTA's Volunteer State."

"There are hundreds of enemies coming," Frederika said, staring into space. "They will overwhelm us and burn this place to the ground. There will be nothing left of both of you and your rotten data but ashes."

"Have faith," the Critic said coolly. "Help will come, as well—from some unlikely quarters. Believe me, I'm doing my very best to maximize the implications of this event. So is my rival, if it comes to that. Thanks to that disk that just arrived, I am wirecasting events here to four hundred of the most volatile network sites in Europe. Yes, the Referee's people may destroy us, but their chances of escaping the consequences are very slim. And if we ourselves die here in flames, it will only lend deeper meaning to our sacrifice."

Eddy gazed at the Critic in honest admiration. "I don't understand a single goddamn word you're saying, but I guess I can recognize a fellow spirit when I meet one. I'm sure CAPCLUG would want me to stay."

"CAPCLUG would want no such thing," the Critic told him soberly. "They would want you to escape, so that they could examine and dissect your experiences in detail. Your American friends are sadly infatuated with the supposed potency of rational, panoptic, digital analysis. Believe me, please—the enormous turbulence in postmodern society is far larger than any single human mind can comprehend, with or without computer-aided perception or the finest computer-assisted frameworks of sociological analysis." The Critic gazed at his workstation, like a herpetologist studying a cobra. "Your CAPCLUG friends will go to their graves never realizing that every vital impulse in human life is entirely pre-rational."

"Well, I'm certainly not leaving here before I figure *that* out," Eddy said. "I plan to help you fight the good fight, sir."

The Critic shrugged, and smiled. "Thank you for just proving me right, young man. Of course a young American hero is welcome to die in Europe's political struggles. I'd hate to break an old tradition."

Glass shattered. A steaming lump of dry ice flew through the window, skittered across the office floor, and began gently dissolving. Acting entirely on instinct, Eddy dashed forward, grabbed it barehanded, and threw it back out the window.

"Are you okay?" Frederika said.

"Sure," Eddy said, surprised.

"That was a chemical gas bomb," Frederika said. She gazed at him as if expecting him to drop dead on the spot.

"Apparently the chemical frozen into the ice was not very toxic," the Critic surmised.

"I don't think it was a gas bomb at all," Eddy said, gazing out the window. "I think it was just a big chunk of dry ice. You Europeans are completely paranoid."

He saw with astonishment that there was a medieval pageant taking place in the street. The followers of the Moral Referee—there were some three or four hundred of them, well-organized and marching forward

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in grimly disciplined silence—apparently had a weakness for medieval jerkins, fringed capes, and colored hose. And torches. They were very big on torches.

The entire building shuddered suddenly, and a burglar siren went off. Eddy craned to look. Half-a-dozen men were battering the door with a hand-held hydraulic ram. They wore visored helmets and metal armor, which gleamed in the summer daylight. "We're being attacking by god-damn knights in shining armor," Eddy said. "I can't believe they're doing this in broad daylight!"

"The football game just started," Frederika said. "They have picked the perfect moment. Now they can get away with anything."

"Do these window-bars come out?" Eddy said, shaking them.

"No. Thank goodness."

"Then hand me some of those data-disks," he demanded. "No, not those shrimpy ones—give me the full thirty-centimeter jobs."

He threw the window up and began pelting the crowd below with flung megabytage. The disks had vicious aerodynamics and were hefty and sharp-edged. He was rewarded with a vicious barrage of bricks, which shattered windows all along the second and third floors.

"They're very angry now," Frederika shouted over the wailing alarm and roar of the crowd below. The three of them crouched under a table.

"Yeah," Eddy said. His blood was boiling. He picked up a long, narrow printer, dashed across the room, and launched it between the bars. In reply, half-a-dozen long metal darts—short javelins, really—flew up through the window and imbedded themselves in the office ceiling.

"How'd they get those through Customs?" Eddy shouted. "Must've made them last night." He laughed. "Should I throw 'em back? I can fetch them if I stand on a chair."

"Don't, don't," Frederika shouted. "Control yourself! Don't kill anyone, it's not professional."

"I'm not professional," Eddy said.

"Get down here," Frederika commanded. When he refused, she scrambled from beneath the table and body-slammed him against the wall. She pinned Eddy's arms, flung herself across him with almost erotic intensity, and hissed into his ear. "Save yourself while you can! This is only a Wende."

"Stop that," Eddy shouted, trying to break her grip. More bricks came through the window, tumbling past their feet.

"If they kill these worthless intellectuals," she muttered hotly, "there will be a thousand more to take their place. But if you don't leave this building right now, you'll die here."

"Christ, I know that," Eddy shouted, finally flinging her backward with a rasp at her sandpaper coat. "Quit being such a loser."

"Eddy, listen!" Frederika yelled, knotting her gloved fists. "Let me save your life! You'll owe me later! Go home to your parents in America, and don't worry about the Wende. This is all we ever do—it's all we are really good for."

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"Hey, I'm good at this too!" Eddy announced. A brick barked his ankle. In sudden convulsive fury, he upended a table and slammed it against a broken window, as a shield. As bricks thudded against the far side of the table, he shouted defiance. He felt superhuman. Her attempt to talk sense had irritated him enormously.

The door broke in downstairs, with a concussive blast. Screams echoed up the stairs. "That's torn it!" Eddy said.

He snatched up a multiplugged power outlet, dashed across the room, and kicked the office door open. With a shout, he jumped onto the landing, swinging the heavy power-strip over his head.

The Critic's academic cadre were no physical match for the Referee's knights-in-armor; but their fire extinguishers were surprisingly effective weapons. They coated everything in white caustic soda and filled the air with great blinding, billowing wads of flying, freezing droplets. It was clear that the defenders had been practicing.

The sight of the desperate struggle downstairs overwhelmed Eddy. He jumped down the stairs three at a time and flung himself into the midst of the battle. He conked a soda-covered helmet with a vicious overhead swing of his power-strip, then slipped and fell heavily on his back.

He began wrestling desperately across the soda-slick floor with a half-blinded knight. The knight clawed his visor up. Beneath the metal mask the knight was, if anything, younger than himself. He looked like a nice kid. He clearly meant well. Eddy hit the kid in the jaw as hard as he could, then began slamming his helmeted head into the floor.

Another knight kicked Eddy in the belly. Eddy fell off his victim, got up, and went for the new attacker. The two of them, wrestling clumsily, were knocked off balance by a sudden concerted rush through the doorway; a dozen Moral raiders slammed through, flinging torches and bottles of flaming gel. Eddy slapped his new opponent across the eyes with his soda-daubed hand, then lurched to his feet and jammed the loose spex back onto his face. He began coughing violently. The air was full of smoke; he was smothering.

He lurched for the door. With the panic strength of a drowning man, he clawed and jostled his way free.

Once outside the data-haven, Eddy realized that he was one of dozens of people daubed head to foot with white foam. Wheezing, coughing, collapsing against the side of the building, he and his fellow refugees resembled veterans of a monster cream-pie fight.

They didn't, and couldn't, recognize him as an enemy. The caustic soda was eating its way into Eddy's cheap jumpsuit, reducing the bubbled fabric to weeping red rags.

Wiping his lips, ribs heaving, Eddy looked around. The spex had guarded his eyes, but their filth subroutine had crashed badly. The internal screen was frozen. Eddy shook the spex with his foamy hands, fingersnapped at them, whistled aloud. Nothing.

He edged his way along the wall.

At the back of the crowd, a tall gentleman in a medieval episcopal

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mitre was shouting orders through a bullhorn. Eddy wandered through the crowd until he got closer to the man. He was a tall, lean man, in his late forties, in brocaded vestments, a golden cloak and white gloves.

This was the Moral Referee. Eddy considered jumping this distinguished gentleman and pummeling him, perhaps wrestling his bullhorn away and shouting contradictory orders through it.

But even if he dared to try this, it wouldn't do Eddy much good. The Referee with the bullhorn was shouting in German. Eddy didn't speak German. Without his spex he couldn't read German. He didn't understand Germans or their issues or their history. In point of fact he had no real reason at all to be in Germany.

The Moral Referee noticed Eddy's fixed and calculating gaze. He lowered his bullhorn, leaned down a little from the top of his portable mahogany pulpit, and said something to Eddy in German.

"Sorry," Eddy said, lifting his spex on their neckchain. "Translation program crashed."

The Referee examined him thoughtfully. "Has the acid in that foam damaged your spectacles?" he said, in excellent English.

"Yes sir," Eddy said. "I think I'll have to strip 'em and blow-dry the chips."

The Referee reached within his robe and handed Eddy a monogrammed linen kerchief. "You might try this, young man."

"Thanks a lot," Eddy said. "I appreciate that, really."

"Are you wounded?" the Referee said, with apparently genuine concern.

"No, sir. I mean, not really."

"Then you'd better return to the fight," the Referee said, straightening. "I know we have them on the run. Be of good cheer. Our cause is just." He lifted his bullhorn again and resumed shouting.

The first floor of the building had caught fire. Groups of the Referee's people were hauling linked machines into the street and smashing them to fragments on the pavement. They hadn't managed to knock the bars from the windows, but they had battered some enormous holes through the walls. Eddy watched, polishing his spex.

Well above the street, the wall of the third floor began to disintegrate.

Moral Knights had broken into the office where Eddy had last seen the Cultural Critic. They had hauled their hydraulic ram up the stairs with them. Now its blunt nose was smashing through the brick wall as if it were stale cheese.

Fist-sized chunks of rubble and mortar cascaded to the street, causing the raiders below to billow away. In seconds, the raiders on the third floor had knocked a hole in the wall the size of a manhole cover. First, they flung down an emergency ladder. Then, office furniture began tumbling out to smash to the pavement below: voice mailboxes, canisters of storage disks, red-spined European law-books, network routers, tape backup-units, color monitors. . . .

A trenchcoat flew out the hole and pinwheeled slowly to earth. Eddy

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recognized it at once. It was Frederika's sandpaper coat. Even in the midst of shouting chaos, with an evil billowing of combusting plastic now belching from the library's windows, the sight of that fluttering coat hooked Eddy's awareness. There was something in that coat. In its sleeve pocket. The key to his airport locker.

Eddy dashed forward, shoved three knights aside, and grabbed up the coat for himself. He winced and skipped aside as a plummeting office chair smashed to the street, narrowly missing him. He glanced up frantically.

He was just in time to see them throw out Frederika.

The tide was leaving Düsseldorf, and with it all the schooling anchovies of Europe. Eddy sat in the departure lounge balancing eighteen separate pieces of his spex on a velcro lap-table.

"Do you need this?" Frederika asked him.

"Oh yeah," Eddy said, accepting the slim chromed tool. "I dropped my dental pick. Thanks a lot." He placed it carefully into his black travel bag. He'd just spent all his European cash on a deluxe, duty-free German electronics repair kit.

"I'm not going to Chattanooga, now or ever," Frederika told him. "So you might as well forget that. That can't be part of the bargain."

"Change your mind," Eddy suggested. "Forget this Barcelona flight, and come transatlantic with me. We'll have a fine time in Chattanooga. There's some very deep people I want you to meet."

"I don't want anybody to meet," Frederika muttered darkly. "And I don't want you to show me off to your little hackerboy friends."

Frederika had taken a hard beating in the riot, while covering the Critic's successful retreat across the rooftop. Her hair had been scorched during the battle, and it had burst from its meticulous braiding like badly overused steel wool. She had a black eye, and her cheek and jaw were scorched and shiny with medicinal gel. Although Eddy had broken her fall, her three-story tumble to the street had sprained her ankle, wrenched her back and barked both knees.

And she had lost her spex.

"You look just fine," Eddy told her. "You're very interesting, that's the point. You're deep! That's the appeal, you see? You're a spook, and a European, and a woman—those are all very deep entities, in my opinion." He smiled.

Eddy's left elbow felt hot and swollen inside his spare shirt; his chest, ribs, and left leg were mottled with enormous bruises. He had a bloodied lump on the back of his head where he'd smashed down into the rubble, catching her.

Altogether, they were not an entirely unusual couple among the departing Wende folk cramming the Düsseldorf airport. As a whole, the crowd seemed to be suffering a massive collective hangover—harsh enough to put many of them into slings and casts. And yet it was amazing how contented, almost smug, many of the vast crowd seemed as they

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departed their pocket catastrophe. They were wan and pale, yet cheerful, like people recovering from flu.

"I don't feel well enough to be deep," Frederika said, stirring in her beanbag. "But you did save my life, Eddy. I do owe you something." She paused. "It has to be something reasonable."

"Don't worry about it," Eddy told her nobly, rasping at the surface of a tiny circuit-board with a plastic spudger. "I mean, I didn't even break your fall, strictly speaking. Mostly I just kept you from landing on your head."

"You did save my life," she repeated quietly. "That crowd would have killed me in the street if not for you."

"You saved the Critic's life. I imagine that's a bigger deal."

"I was paid to save his life," Frederika said. "Anyway, I didn't save the bastard. I just did my job. He was saved by his own cleverness. He's been through a dozen of these damned things." She stretched cautiously, shifting in her beanbag. "So have I, for that matter. . . . I must be a real fool. I endure a lot to live my precious life. . . ." She took a deep breath. "Barcelona, *yo te quiero*."

"I'm just glad we checked out of that clinic in time to catch our flights," Eddy told her, examining his work with a jeweler's loupe. "Could you believe all those soccer kids in there? They sure were having fun. . . . Why couldn't they be that good-tempered *before* they beat the hell out of each other? Some things are just a mystery, I guess."

"I hope you have learned a good lesson from this," Frederika said.

"Sure have," Eddy nodded. He blew dried crud from the point of his spudger, then picked up a chrome pinchclamp and threaded a tiny screw through the earpiece of his spex. "I can see a lot of deep potential in the Wende. It's true that a few dozen people got killed here, but the city must have made an absolute fortune. That's got to look promising for the Chattanooga city council. And a Wende offers a lot of very useful exposure and influence for a cultural networking group like CAPCLUG."

"You've learned nothing at all," she groaned. "I don't know why I hoped it would be different."

"I admit it—in the heat of the action I got a little carried away," Eddy said. "But my only real regret is that you won't come with me to America, Or, if you'd really rather, take me to Barcelona. Either way, the way I see it, you need someone to look after you for a while."

"You're going to rub my sore feet, yes?" Frederika said sourly. "How generous you are."

"I dumped my creep girlfriend. My dad will pick up my tab. I can help you manage better. I can improve your life. I can fix your broken appliances. I'm a nice guy."

"I don't want to be rude," she said, "but after this, the thought of being touched is repulsive." She shook her head, with finality. "I'm sorry, Eddy, but I can't give you what you want."

Eddy sighed, examined the crowd for a while, then repacked the segments of his spex and closed his tool kit. At last he spoke up again. "Do you virch?"

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"What?"

"Do you do virtuality?"

She was silent for a long moment, then looked him in the eye. "You don't do anything really strange or sick on the wires, do you, Edward?"

"There's hardly any subjective time-lag if you use high-capacity trans-atlantic fiber," Eddy said.

"Oh. I see."

"What have you got to lose? If you don't like it, hang up."

Frederika tucked her hair back, examined the departure board for the flight to Barcelona, and looked at the toes of her shoes. "Would this make you happy?"

"No," Eddy said. "But it'd make me a whole lot more of what I already am." ●

CURSE OF THE MERMAN'S WIFE

By the dark of the shoreline,
'neath the dark of the sky,
her figure is moving tonight.
She speaks not a word,
but her coattails fly
and she leaves with a breath from our sight.

Her father and mother
lie in a house,
sleep claims their minds and their eyes.
Her father awakens,
discovers her gone,
and rumples the night with his cries.

The wind rocks the high masts,
the moon breaks the clouds,
by the old wooden pier she does fly.
Her cheeks they are heated,
her breath it is fast,
and her eyes are not for the sky.

His sea-dark-bright body
lies by the shore,
the moon lights the scales on his thighs.
He waits for his lover
to hurry to him,
and swallow the sea with her sighs.

—Bruce Boston

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Sleeper or Sleepless

Beggars in Spain
By Nancy Kress
Morrow, $23

The baffling title of Nancy Kress's novel, *Beggars in Spain*, does not signify an all-too-realistic story about the underclass in Seville. Its significance, in fact, relates to a parable which one of the characters raises early in the book that eventually becomes one of the central themes, and has to do with compassion, based on the decision almost all of us make daily—do we or don't we give money to the panhandler who accosts us on the street?

SF does not usually lend itself to this sort of philosophical query, but one subgenre in particular is made for humanistic questioning, that of the "superman" or "homo superior" or however one characterizes it. It's a rare but enduring theme in the genre, and has been having something of a renaissance lately due to advances in genetic modification. The earlier examples (Stapledon's superb *Odd John*, for instance) predicated a natural evolutionary step to the next stage of mankind, but several recent novels have ventured onto the slippery slope of extrapolating artificially created superior races.

In the case of *Beggars in Spain*, in the near future genetic modification exists in numerous forms. Fetuses can be altered in many ways, for brains, beauty, whatever. But a new modification brings unexpected consequences—the ability to go without sleep results in persons who not only have a great deal more time to apply themselves usefully, but who are also more intelligent and better natured than sleepers. (A good job is done as to justifying the lack of need for sleep.)

There is an initial rush to purchase these modifications (modified traits are sold) resulting in a sizable generation of "sleepless." And then, after the first few sleepless reach maturity, it's discovered that they don't age, that they have a long, *long* lifetime of eternal youth.

The inevitable happens; the "sleepers" of the world turn on the sleepless, the brilliant, ageless new race. That particular genemod is no longer purchased—why buy a lifetime of prejudice and downright danger for your child? But the trait breeds true, and the sleepless continue to add to their numbers.

We follow the saga of the new race focusing on two of the original sleepless. Both are female, beautiful and eventually very rich. Jennifer Sharifi chooses the elitist

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path, and is instrumental in creating "Sanctuary," an impregnable enclave. Leisha Camden chooses to (depending on the run of events in the many years covered by the narrative) side with the "beggars" or simply retire from the fray. Much happens: a sleeper is murdered and Jennifer is accused of the crime, adding to the sleepers' hatred; Sanctuary is moved to an orbiting space station; the entire social structure of the country changes to a population of "livers" who live on bread and circuses, "donkeys" who are the comparatively few sleepers who have the initiative to run things, and the sleepless who keep a low profile but have much influence though still vulnerable. And then the sleepless perfect yet a further modification of humanity, and a showdown looms between Sanctuary and the United States.

It's a long and complex story Kress tells, but almost continually absorbing in the interplay between great events and the several personalities in the foreground of these events. And as you may guess, the epithet "beggars" does not always apply to the sleepers.

Good Christians

The Oathbound Wizard

By Christopher Stasheff
Del Rey, $20

Nearly a decade ago, Christopher Stasheff, then in the midst of his popular "Warlock" series, published a single novel that went fairly unremarked called *Her Majesty's Wizard*. Perhaps one should say unfairly unremarked, since of its kind it was highly readable and amusing, if derivative. It unabashedly takes us back to the grand original of de Camp's and Pratt's Harold Shea & Co.wherein a mild-mannered academic from our world rather effortlessly slips into a magic world, applies logic to the magical "rules" and becomes, if not an expert, at least a working wizard.

The rules are pretty familiar. Spells are rhymes and it doesn't take long for our hero, Matt Mantrell, to figure out the logic of it, which gives him an advantage since logic doesn't play that much of a part in the locals' thinking. What Stasheff keeps consistently amusing, however, is Matt's sometimes desperate resorting to not quite appropriate rhymes (luckily, he knows more than the average bloke) and their dubious results. He thereby saves the kingdom, befriends a dragon, and of course, wins the princess.

Or does he? The long-overdue sequel, *The Oathbound Wizard*, begins three years later and Matt and Alisande are still only engaged, though he is now chief wizard to her kingdom (despite some ongoing logistical problems). The problem is buried in the curious rules of this world, in which what is considered simple idealism in our part of the continuum becomes law there. For instance, Matt, in a moment of pique, swears to God that he will win his own kingdom, that of the evil witch king next door, to be specific. And so he must, having sworn. Alisande has him confined to a dungeon for his own safety. (Her reluctance to wed Matt has been a product of this same code [or rule] of ethics.)

So there is our story—Matt, of course, escapes, and goes through

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all sorts of adventures, spiced by the unexpected misfiring of many of his Earthly rhymes. In the process, he manages to manifest Maxwell's demon (a determinedly antimetaphysical entity who also appeared in the first volume) and his (its?) antithesis, Robin Goodfellow, on behalf of his cause. He also manifests that other Robin, the Hood fellow, and *his* followers, who turn up immortally in any universe that needs truth and justice. And then there's a dracogriff named Narlh, a half breed whose innocent gryphon mother was taken advantage of by a dragon; he is certainly one of the more engaging non-humanoid characters to come along lately.

One note on originality—the good guys here are Christians, the backing forces the patron saints of the various kingdoms (the kingdom Matt sets out to win is their equivalent of Spain, and their saint, Iago). You have to go back quite a way to find a fantasy in which the Christian crowd are anything but intolerant Puritan types (particularly in the Arthurians, of course—paganism is always the tragically losing force); it's rather refreshing here for Christianity to be just one more mode of belief with its own magic and powers, and positive to boot.

The Starving Author

The Singularity Project
By F. M. Busby
Tor, $21.95

One has learned to expect from F. M. Busby stories that are always smoothly written and conceptually intelligent, and while he has yet to come out with that blockbuster, the potential is certainly there. But his latest, *The Singularity Project,* is not it. In fact, I'm hard put to understand its *raison d'être*; i. e., it's one of those books that you wonder why anyone went to the trouble of writing. Oh, it's certainly smoothly written, but as for the plot. . . .

Basically, it's the old "we possibly have this tremendous invention which will change the world" (in this case a matter transmitter) and the intrigues and complications that surround its (possible) completion. The cast of characters is a familiar one. The tale is told by a freelance journalist hoping to be in on a big story at the beginning. There is the bullying millionaire who is needed to back the final stages, brought together with the fumbling and eccentric (and in this case, heroin-addicted) inventor by a slick "agent" who is a con man known to the journalist from way back. There is the journalist's very smart lady friend, and the inevitable anonymous character who writes poison pen notes under the *nom de plume* of "The Green Hornet," insisting that the rights to the invention are his (possibly hers) and provides all sorts of diversions with blackmail, kidnaping, and murder. There are a couple of characters from out of left field: the millionaire's sex-changed brother and the pint-sized Amazon Indian who is the con man's auxiliary.

From the cast, you can pretty well get a general idea of the plot. After one disastrous demonstration that is a success that becomes a fraudulent failure, the story continues to a satisfactory climax.

I suppose you could argue all day as to whether this really *is* SF at

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all, since the properties of the invention are never used except for demo purposes, and the invention itself might as well be a super pasta maker. But Busby gives it his usual polish; however, I can't resist citing a particular quirk in this book that I hadn't noticed in his previous writing. Perhaps it's because I've just been through a medical experience that has severely limited my eating, but it seems to me that I've never read a book in which so much emphasis is placed on what people ate:

"In the freezer I came up with a ziplocked brick of leftover turkey chili, dated not too far back. I gave the microwave my best guess for timing but it needed a second shot to melt it all the way through. . . ." (p. 100).

"From the fridge I sandwiched liverwurst between caraway rye with hot mustard. . . ." (p. 125).

". . . when I opened the fridge I realized I was hungry again . . . liverwurst on caraway rye, with mustard and a little horse radish." (p. 170).

". . . we had quite a pleasant snack: good coarse tasty bread, Swiss cheese, salami. The veg part was lettuce and celery and tomatoes and cucumbers, and we each had a bottle of Mexican beer alongside." (p. 202).

". . . with a couple of pork chops under my belt, plus the inevitable vegetables, my head came back online." (p. 210).

"Over dinner, one of my better efforts at gourmet thawing . . ." (p. 270).

". . . this day was made for eggs and toast and Canadian bacon." (p. 280).

"What we ate was some sort of chicken goobly Dauna clobbered from odds and ends in freezer baggies." (p. 288).

"From the veggie bin and a can I mixed tuna salad and made sandwiches . . ." (p. 291).

"Dinner was pot roast with carrots and onions and potatoes and celery and turnips at the very least; stuffed, I wasn't ready for the pie afterward." (p. 298).

"Alice and I sat down to soup and sandwiches, split pea and roast beef respectively, plus coffee." (p. 300).

I make note of this with no particular bias. Knowing what your characters are eating day by day certainly adds to the realism. But it does make you wonder if Mr. Busby was that hungry while writing.

Bits of Genius

The Haunted Pampero

By William Hope Hodgson, Illustrated by Arthur E. More
Donald Grant, $30

I am loathe to use the word "genius" too often, but I must admit to having it float through my mind when reading the works of or writing about William Hope Hodgson. "Who?" rises the question from those who believe SF began with the first season of "Star Trek."

Let me tell you about William Hope Hodgson by paraphrasing myself (from *A Reader's Guide To Science Fiction*). He was English, the son of an Anglican priest. He was a seafarer, a disciple of the great bodybuilder Eugene Sandow, a winner of the Royal Humane Society medal for heroism, a crusader for seamen's rights, and one of the

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most talented of early photographers. He was extraordinarily handsome. He was killed by a shell burst at Ypres in 1918 (WWI), to my mind one of the great losses of that terrible war. He was forty years of age.

He published four works long enough to be considered novels. For his short stories, he might be lucky to have gotten fifty dollars. His photographs went for six to eight dollars.

This, of course, was the period of experimentation with science fiction and fantasy and there were no easy pigeonholes. Of the novels, the most monumental can only be considered SF. In *The Night Land,* it is a future so distant the world has stopped revolving, but life is kept extant in the darkness by fields of radioactivity. Strange and powerful forces roam The Land, and all of humanity has gathered in a last redoubt, a great pyramid eight miles high. But a telepathic call for help comes across The Land, and one man sets out on an odyssey to find the rest of humanity. This blow-by-blow account runs two hundred thousand words! *The House On the Borderland,* a fantasy, tells of a man living in an isolated house in Ireland, under siege from strange beings and visions. The sea was the background for many of Hodgson's stories (obviously with a good deal of authenticity given his seafaring background); *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* is another fantasy set in strange waters and the stranger things found there by a lifeboat with survivors of a wreck, while *The Ghost Pirates*—well, you're on a sailing ship off the charted lanes before the invention of radio and the ship is overrun by murderous wraiths. Where do you turn? All four of these novels, whether they can be considered SF or fantasy, are also absolutely terrifying—I think moments of *The House On the Borderland* are about as frightening as anything I've ever read.

The short stories don't have the cumulative power of the novels, of course, but many, particularly the sea stories, have the same eerie quality.

Hodgson's work has been known to, and admired by, a faithful few (including Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith), but over the years there has been the terrifying possibility that they simply would not see print again, since reprints are not exactly going to hit the best-seller list. But thanks to enthusiasts and archivists, particularly the indefatigable Sam Moskowitz, all is not lost. (If you want your name to live on after you die, impress Mr. Moskowitz.) Following a collection of previously uncollected short stories by Hodgson (*Out of the Storm,* 1975), Moskowitz now gives us a new such collection with stories previously unseen between book covers. Most are of the sea; some are fantasies, some have natural explanations for apparently supernatural events. Among the prizes are the title story, in which something nasty comes aboard a sailing ship in the guise of a rescued castaway, and "The Silent Ship"—a story that is apparently the concluding original four thousand words of *The Ghost Pirates.* It chronicles the concluding events of that story as seen by another ship. The story stands neatly alone, or as

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a valid addendum to the original.

There is also an exhaustive account by Moskowitz of "The Posthumous Acceptance of William Hope Hodgson 1918-1943," which primarily chronicles the heroic measures to which Hodgson's widow went to keep his work in print in Britain and America. She died in 1943, just before the publication of the great Arkham House edition of the four novels that insured a new generation of admirers.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . Fear To the World by Kevin E. Proulx is subtitled "Eleven Voices in a Chorus of Horror" which makes you wonder if one of those little musical chips is going to go off with the *Deus Irae* when you open the book. What it really is is interviews with eleven writers including Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell, George R. R. Martin, and Steve Rasnic Tem (Starmont House, $24 hard-cover, $14 paperback). *Stainless Steel Visions* is a collection by (who else) Harry Harrison. It includes a dozen previously published works as well as a new, never-before-published Stainless Steel Rat story. It's illustrated by Bryn Barnard (Tor, $18.95).

Science fiction non-fiction . . . There is a new edition of nonfiction work which I missed the first time around that's based on a fascinating premise. *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763-3749* by I. F. Clarke is a history of literary future wars beginning with a work published in 1763 that is set in 1918. Obviously the history of SF gives Clarke a lot to work with, but there are many unexpected pregenre examples (Oxford University Press, $25).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . it's only been eighteen years since Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's gripping SF novel, *The Mote in God's Eye,* was published. Remember the buttons—"Can I be your fyunch (click)?"? Now, finally, a sequel, *The Gripping Hand* (Pocket Books, $22) . . . Robert J. Sawyer's *Far-Seer* was a quite original and highly readable novel about a saurian civilization on a tiny world that was breaking up. The sequel is *Fossil Hunter* (Ace, $4.99, paper).

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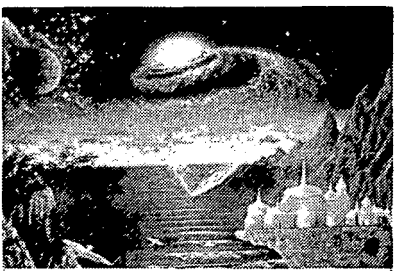

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

July 15 is the last chance to join this year's San Francisco WorldCon for the lower, advance-purchase rate. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. When phoning, be polite. Look for me as Filthy Pierre.

JUNE 1993

25-27—**MidWestCon. For info, write: Pat Sims, 34 Creekwood Sq., Glendale OH 45246.** Or phone: **(513) 984-1447 or 631-2543 or 771-7587** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Cincinnati OH (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: no big names planned.

24-27—**Lithuania National Con. (8-0127) 713-772.** Kaunas, Lithuania. Run by SF Club "Finiksas."

25-27—**Czech and Slovak Nat'l Con. (0649) 42-12-14.** Sumperk, Czech Republic. Combined cons.

25-27—**WilfCon. (519) 743-9485 or 746-7840.** Wilfred Laurier U., Waterloo, ON. Dates not yet firm.

25-27—**Atlanta Fantasy Fair. (404) 985-1230.** Atlanta GA. Media-oriented. 5000 fans are expected.

JULY 1993

2-4—**Origins. (410) 298-3135.** Radisson, Ft. Worth TX. The annual national wargaming convention.

2-4—**TexTrek. (817) 790-6421.** Convention Center, Arlington TX. Media event. Star Trek: TNG guests.

2-4—**SF Days. (011-49) 2324-52872.** Conference Center, Dusseldorf Germany. Harry Harrison.

2-4—**InConJunction. (317) 839-5519.** Adam's Mark Hotel, Indianapolis IN. Drake, P. Davis, Andrews.

2-4—**Anime Expo. (510) 451-4000.** Convention Center and Parc Hotel, Oakland CA. Japanimation con.

2-5—**WesterCon. (206) 742-8943.** Red Lion Hotel, Bellevue, WA. G. Bear, G. Barr, G. A. Effinger.

3-4—**Montreal SF Festival.** Holiday Inn, Pointe Claire PQ. Robin Curtis, Larry Stewart, S. Aldred.

5-9—**Tulum. (+38 41) 42-42-76 or 68-24-54 or 27-26-28 (fax).** Zagreb Croatia. If war news permits.

9-11—**IV-Khan % Tegen, 2926 Valerie Cir., Colorado Springs CO 80917. (719) 597-5259.** Gaming con.

9-11—**ReaderCon, Box 381246, Cambridge, MA 02238. (617) 776-6508.** Worcester MA. Written SF.

9-11—**Archon, Box 50125, Clayton, MO 63105. (314) 326-3026.** St. Louis MO. H. Waldrop, C. Lundgren.

16-18—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta, GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** Over 6000 expected; many guests.

16-18—**ConVersion, Box 1088, Stn. M, Calgary AB T2P 2K9. (403) 242-1807.** L. Sprague & C. deCamp.

16-18—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. (412) 344-0456.** DeChancie, Janda, Laskowski.

16-18—**Rhino, Box 1451, Stn. B., London ON N6A 5M2.** Plans for this are tentative at press time.

17-18—**Campbell Conference, % J. Gunn, English Dept., U. of Kansas, Lawrence KS 66045.** Academic.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek, CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon $110.

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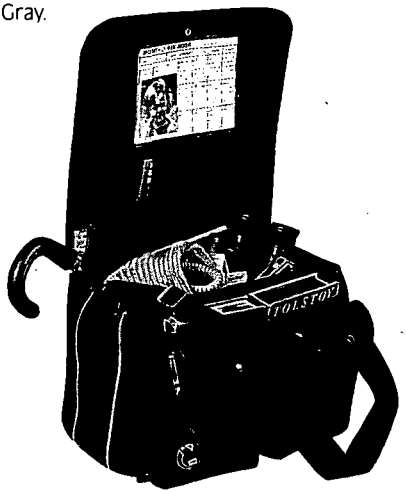

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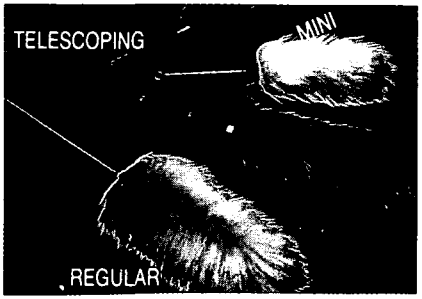

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